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JULY, 1949

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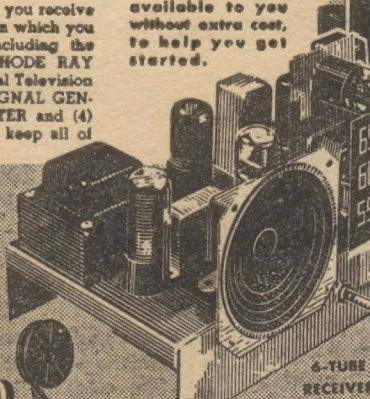
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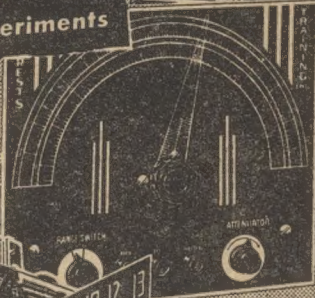
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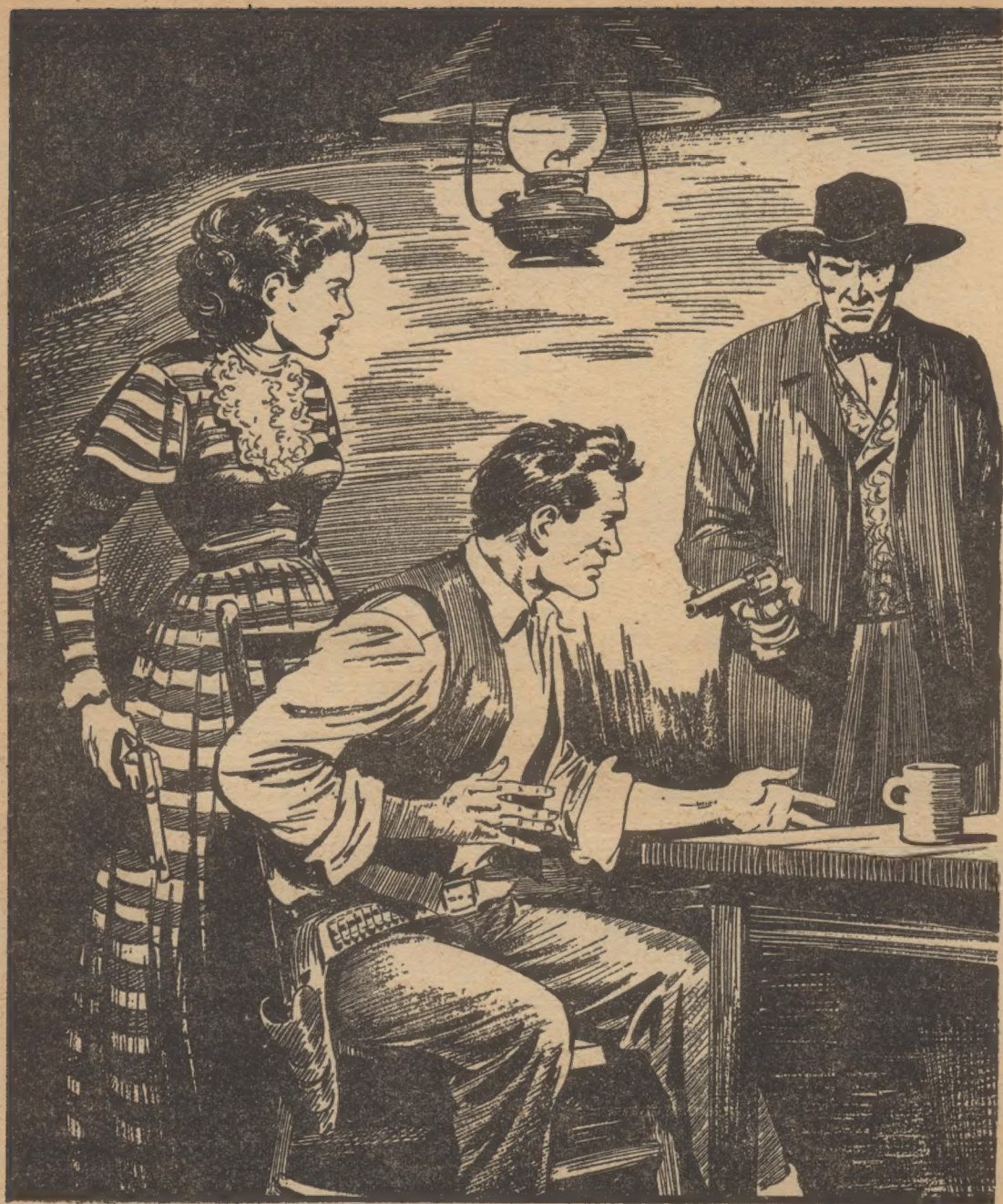
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CHAPTER ONE

Blood Hunt

SIN BODIE came through the door first. He was a slim young man in an impeccably cut fustian and foxed trousers, with a pale, narrow wedge of a face, and eyes that never quite seemed to focus on any single object. He

stood there looking around, till Mojave Keller followed him through the door. Mojave was the sheriff of Volcano, a heavy, slow-moving draft-horse of a man, hugging his massive shoulders into a fleece-lined mackinaw, stamping the snow vindictively from his boots.

"Hello, Mr. Rocklin," murmured Sin Bodie. "Setting up the evening edition?"

By
LARRY SANDERS

Rocklin looked bleakly at Bodie's gun,
and started to rise. . . .



GUNSHOT EDITOR

Morgan Rocklin went on spreading his thick, viscid printer's ink out on the table with a palette knife. He had been the editor of this California mining town's only paper since 1855, when he had come out of the mines with enough money to buy himself a printing press and an office. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his late twenties, with a long, intense

The nights are dark in Volcano, where you live by the light of your gunflame—or die by a better man's bullets!

face, gaunt-jawed and deep-eyed. Unruly strands of his long black hair fell across his high brow, whipping back and forth with each vigorous sweep of his palette knife.

Sin Bodie removed a long, thin cigar from the pocket of his coat and walked up to the counter that stretched across the width of the office. "You shouldn't ignore us, Mr. Rocklin. We might be wanting to run an ad in your paper or something. How about this? 'Wanted, a new editor for the *Volcano Voice*. Last editor run out of town on a rail for preaching against Noyo Kane's proposed toll road through Noyo Canyon.'"

Rocklin detached the roller from his press and began to roll it across the ink. "Who's going to do the running?" he asked.

"Never can tell, Mr. Rocklin," Bodie told him. "Might be almost anybody. Might come almost any time."

"Cut out this horse-trading and come to the point, Sin," Mojave said in his deep, guttural voice. Powdery snow ruffled off the swing of his shoulders as he wheeled to push his way through the gate and around behind the counter. Rocklin straightened abruptly from the ink-table, roller in hand. Mojave stopped short a pace from the table, staring at the roller. Then his tawny eyes lifted to Rocklin.

"Kane says you've got to stop criticizing his toll road, Rocklin," he said. "The stage line is going to be run up through Noyo Canyon no matter what you have to say about it."

Rocklin asked, "Why should it run over Kane's toll road when Luther Pass is free, and fifteen miles closer to the main route of travel?"

"Luther Pass won't be free," Mojave told him. "They've got to raise fifty thousand dollars from each county to pay for a road through there. They'll never be able to do it."

"Not if Kane gets his crooked commissioners elected to vote against the bond issue," said Rocklin, with growing heat.

"You're repeating yourself, Mr. Rocklin," Bodie told him, mildly. "I read the same statement in your editorial last week."

"And I'll keep repeating myself," Rocklin told them, "until this town wakes to what Noyo Kane is putting over. If this toll road will be such a benefit to the community, why does Kane have to buy all the votes for the commissioner he's backing in this election; why was Mike Healy beaten after he made a speech to the miners' meeting against the toll road; why—"

"You're repeating yourself again, Mr. Rocklin," Bodie told him, lighting the cigar. "That's just what Kane's getting tired of. He wants you to stop it."

Rocklin made a snorting, disgusted sound, and went back to rolling the ink. Mojave looked at Bodie. The slim young man drew attentively on his cigar, flipped the match out and dropped it. Then he gazed around the room.

"Nice little printing office you have here. Takes a lot of ambition to work three years in the mines so you can finance something like this. Be a shame if something happened to it."

"Be a shame for whoever made it happen," muttered Rocklin.

"You're stubborn, Rocklin," Mojave said.

"And you're bought, Mojave. Tell Kane I'll talk with the sheriff when the only salary he gets comes from the board of commissioners."

Anger sharpened the planes of the sheriff's blunt face, but some idle movement of Sin Bodie's held him, turning his eyes toward the man for an instant. Bodie had taken his cigar from his mouth, breathing out a thin spiral of smoke with his words, staring absently

at the pile of newspapers on the counter before him.

"You don't want to let Mr. Rocklin spook you, sheriff," he told Keller. Then he raised his eyes from the paper to Rocklin. "Is there nothing we can say that will persuade you to stop these unfounded accusations against Noyo Kane, Mr. Rocklin?"

"You might as well have saved your breath," Rocklin answered, still rolling out the ink.

Sin Bodie put the cigar back in his mouth. Then, without warning, he heaved the whole pile of papers off the counter at Rocklin. They were aimed to smother the gun holstered at Rocklin's hip, and their weight was enough to have blocked off his draw—if he hadn't been waiting for something like that. He wheeled in one sharp motion so that the bulk of the papers brushed across his belly, tearing at the buttons of his shirt.

It freed his gun for the draw, and in the instant it took to pull the weapon out he lifted the heavy, inked roller with his other hand, and threw it at Mojave. It caught the man just as he got his gun free, striking him full in the face and knocking him back against the counter. He dropped the gun, going to his knees, the heavy roller dropping away to thud against the floor, leaving its broad, black imprint across the stunned pain of his face.

Rocklin had not moved from the old Albion handpress after drawing his Navy revolver. His back was against the form, with his left side toward Sin Bodie, the gun held across his belly, flat against it, pointing at Bodie. The man had gone for his own weapon after heaving those papers, but Rocklin's gun had come out first. Bodie stood for a moment, hand inside the lapel of his fustian, looking across the counter at the Navy Rocklin held. Then, slowly, he removed the hand.

"Can you get up, Mr. Keller?" he asked.

The sheriff had to catch the counter to pull himself off his knees. He pawed at the ink on his face, blinking at Rocklin.

"Blast you," he said, and turned to stumble through the gate and toward the door.

Sin Bodie continued to gaze across the counter at Rocklin. His smile was as unperturbed, as effortless as if nothing had occurred.

"Did it ever strike you, Mr. Rocklin, how lost you'd be in this town, without that gun?"

MORGAN ROCKLIN closed his office at six that evening, after printing the edition. Most of the distribution consisted of passing it out to the furtive people who came to his back door, afraid to buy the paper openly in the face of Noyo Kane's known disapproval. Rocklin took what papers remained under one arm, to pass them out free himself.

Volcano, in 1857, was one of the most populous mining centers in the California Sierras, its hundreds of ramshackle cabins flung haphazardly into a perfect bowl of a valley, completely surrounded by the towering majesty of the mountains. Locking his door, Rocklin turned to stand there in the deepening twilight for a moment, savoring the town. It was a town a man could come to love, despite its rough, squalid appearance. There was a vigor here, a sense of achievement to the jostling, laboring crowds of miners that filled the streets at this hour, going off shift, and the endless lines of ore and freight wagons groaning up and down the grades. Rocklin was deeply immersed in that vigor and achievement, having spent the first three years here in the mines, eking out the money that would start him on his way. His father had been a newspaperman, one of those itiner-

ant, ubiquitous rumpots of the old school who never stayed long in one place. He had left Rocklin but two things—an almost congenital need to be a newspaperman himself, and a burning adherence to the truth.

In the whole town there was only one sidewalk, two hundred feet of it, running down in front of the biggest building in the town, the Toll House Inn, a great, rustic, three-story hostelry of logs and shiplap, with a bar and gambling halls taking up its lower floor. It was the hub of the town and the center of news and gossip. Rocklin made it a point to eat dinner there nightly.

He passed down the line of false-fronted buildings toward the Inn. Before the Double-Zero Mining Company's offices, a group of rough, bearded men was gathered, mackinaw collars turned up against the raw bite of the evening wind. Rocklin recognized several he had worked with in the mines, and stopped, taking a paper from under his arm.

"I'm the newsboy tonight," he grinned. "How about you, Grant? A free copy to my old friends. Read what Noyo Kane is doing to your town."

Leg Grant glanced once at Rocklin, then turned hurriedly to step out in the street. "Gotta hurry, Rock. Late for supper last night and my wife whaled me."

Rocklin's smile faded a little, as he turned to another. "How about you, Ajax? You were never afraid of the truth."

The big Swede's grin was uncomfortable. "You know ay can't read Rock."

"Tanny can read it to you," Rocklin told him.

Virgil Tanny shifted his boots restlessly at the powdered snow. "Listen, Rock. I used to read the *Volcano Voice* all the time, you know that. But McNary was found beaten almost to death out behind the Toll House Inn last night. He

had a copy of your paper in his hand."

Rocklin's smile was gone completely, now. "I'm sorry, Tanny. I wouldn't expect you or anybody else to bring something like that on themselves—unless they wanted to. But let me tell you this. Sometime, you're going to want to. If Kane keeps on, he'll have the lid screwed down so tight on this town you won't be able to get up off your bellies. And you'll remember the time you had a chance to read the truth—and didn't take it."

He turned from them to walk on toward the Toll House. This was such a usual thing that the edge had gone from the bitterness of it now. He viewed it with a growing detachment, an almost rueful amusement, that a man who had once belonged so completely to this town, and who wanted to be a part of it so much, should be ostracized simply for telling the truth.

The first thing that struck the eye upon entering the Toll House was the dazzling display of cut glass piled upon the gleaming mahogany bar that ran the full length of the building, along the right side of the huge hall. The walls were turned rustic by the immense pine logs, with the bark still on them, that formed a wainscoting up to a man's waist; from here to the ceiling, rich wine satin hangings billowed out as if in a wind. The broad staircase, carpeted in bright red, descended from a balcony to the center rear of the hall. On either side of this were the gambling tables; and a row of dining booths, curtained and secretive, ran down the wall opposite the bar. The place was crowded at this hour, the bar lined three deep, the gambling tables already gathering a mob. The voices formed an incoherent surf of sound, with snatches of conversation rising to the surface in surprising clarity, and the metallic chant of a keno caller saying numbers with the regularity of a machine.

Rocklin shouldered unhurriedly through the crowd, nodding to his acquaintances, until he reached an empty dining table. He put down his remaining papers and seated himself. One of the white-jacketed waiters came rocketing through the crowd for his order.

AFTER the waiter left, Rocklin saw Marcia Ashford coming through the crowd toward him, and felt the inevitable lift of pleasure. She was one of the hostesses here, a title that did not carry the odium it would in one of the dives farther down Redpine Street. There was something regal about her magnificent body. Candlelight from the chandeliers above drank in the slightest ripple of the red silk dress she was wearing. It turned the flesh of her bare shoulders to cream, and brought a soft, glossy texture to her upswept coif, held in place by a white Spanish comb. Her wide, candid eyes were on Rocklin all the way across the room, filled with a subdued, kindling light they always seemed to take on when she saw him. He rose and pulled out a chair for her.

"Perhaps I'm asking for trouble, being seen with Noyo Kane's girl," he smiled.

Her underlip pouted. "I thought you were one person who wouldn't listen to rumors, Rocklin."

He reseated himself, smiling. "I listen to all rumors, Marcia. I believe none of them till they become facts."

This drew a soft, husky laugh from her that stirred the satiny flesh of her throat. "And you're not afraid of Noyo Kane." She stopped laughing, leaning toward him with a strange, intense look to her face. "Perhaps that's what draws me to you. There isn't another man in this town who'd have the courage to be seen with me if he thought I was Noyo Kane's girl."

"Are you in love with Kane, Marcia?" he asked, soberly.

She straightened a little. "Noyo's been good to me, Rocklin. He's given me a wonderful job, he's spent a lot of money on me, he's made me queen of the town. But when I give my love to a man, it won't be because of those things."

His smile took the gauntness from his face. "I'm glad for that. It still leaves me a chance, then."

She answered that with another of those throaty little laughs. The humor of it faded swiftly, however, as her eyes dropped to the papers on the table.

"You're still riding it hard, I see?"

He shrugged. "Somebody has to."

Her eyes rose to his. "Rocklin, your adherence to the truth of a matter has always been admirable to me. But shouldn't truth include both sides of a question? I've never seen a word in your column concerning Kane's side. The people of these counties have been trying to get a stage route clear through the Sierras for years. It would cut off hundreds of miles if people could come in over the central route by stage instead of taking the southern route through San Diego. Kane offers them that chance. His toll road is already built through the worst part of the mountains. All they'd have to do is connect it up at either end. It won't cost them one tenth as much to do that as it would to develop a whole new route through Luther Pass."

"If Kane's road is so beneficial, why is he using such means to gain his ends, Marcia?" asked Rocklin. "Why does he suppress the opposition; why does he have to buy the votes for the commissioner he's backing in this election; why does he have to coerce men when they won't be bought?"

She looked at him coldly.

"You've never proved any of that, Rocklin," she said.

"I've seen it, and someday I'll get proof," he said. "If a few of these people in Volcano find the guts to come out of

their holes. When a man has to use those methods to gain his ends, Marcia, something's wrong."

"What's wrong about it?" she said. "You've always told me how much you loved this town. It doesn't seem to me you're boosting it much by fighting a bill that would bring the main stage route right through Volcano."

"And avoid almost every other town that would be serviced if the road went through Luther Pass," he said. "Volcano's always been off the main route, Marcia. A spur route would be easy enough to build."

"It wouldn't bring us half the business a main line would," she said, shaking her head. "I think you're wrong, Rocklin. As much as I admire you, I think you're wrong."

"I would be in favor of a road of this type if I thought it could help Volcano without hurting the people," he said. "But it's already hurt the people, Marcia. Men have been beaten and forced out of town for opposing it. And they'll be hurt more." He frowned at the table. "I guess the road isn't actually the basic issue—it's the methods Kane has always used to gain his ends. He's fought his way to the top here with the dirtiest methods possible. He owns half of Volcano, controls the other half. He'll be charging you to breathe, in a little while."

"It that a fact, young man?" asked Noyo Kane, from behind Rocklin. The editor turned. Kane was actually no older than Rocklin, a broad man, built low to the ground, with wide hips and wide shoulders and a wide, genial grin on his face that never wore out. He was handsome in a rough, masculine way, with curly black hair, twinkling blue eyes and white teeth. He slapped Rocklin on the back with one broad, black-haired hand, and pulled a cheroot from the pocket of his cassimere coat with the other, stuffing it into Rocklin's mouth.

"Have a cigar, Mr. Editor," he grinned, genially. "I understand you got the drop on my boy, Sinclair Bodie, this afternoon. Any man who does that deserves a cigar. What do you think the chances are of the Noyo Toll Road being voted into the stage line?"

ROCKLIN removed the cigar, peeled back his lips to pick a piece of its wrapping from his teeth. "You're smokes are getting cheaper, Noyo. Is it breaking you to buy so many votes?"

Kane laughed heartily, turning to Marcia. "Always repartee. I'll be sorry to see him go, won't you, Marcia? He's the only man in this town with the guts to talk back."

"That's something for which you should give him more credit than you do, Noyo," she said.

"On the contrary," said Kane, a hurt look crossing his broad face. "I don't know how many times I've offered him a job in my organization. Fabulous salary. He seems to think I'm such an ogre. Ah, well—" he laughed again, leathery folds forming in his neck by the dip of his chin—"that's life in the mines. Have a drink, Rocklin. They're on me tonight."

He walked away grinning, slapping men on the back, passing out cigars. "Have a drink, boys. On me tonight. Toast the Noyo Toll Road."

And behind him, like a silent pilot fish following its shark, Sin Bodie, dipping his head at Rocklin with no expression, with no signs of anger in those calm, depthless eyes that left Rocklin to rove around the room without seeming to see any of the men, without ever settling on any particular thing. Kane made his way through the crowd and vaulted up to the bar, waving his hands for quiet. He pointed to a small, bald man in the crowd.

"There's Elmer Pease, boys; hand him

up, hand him up! I want you to see your new commissioner."

Half a dozen husky miners caught Pease and lifted him, squirming and flailing, onto the bar. He tugged at his wrinkled bed-of-flowers waistcoat and smoothed back a few sparse hairs on his bald pate, regaining his dignity with effort. Then he forced a smile, thrusting his paunch out expansively and throwing up his hand in a flamboyant gesture.

"My friends and fellow constituents—"

"That's it, Elmer," called Kane, slapping him on the back. "Here he is, boys, a man of the people, a man who will see that Volcano is put on the map. Elect Pease and they won't bypass your town to head through Luther Pass."

"How are the freight companies going to meet the price of your toll, coming through Noyo Canyon, Kane?" asked someone from the crowd.

"Mike Healy, the fool," hissed Marcia, turning sharply in her chair. "Doesn't he know better than to raise the issue here?"

Kane turned his dazzling, unperturbed smile in the direction of the scowling, black-browed miner who had spoken. "I don't deny that they'll raise their rates a little, Mike," he said, "but that shouldn't worry you none."

"If it costs more to ship food in here, it'll cost more to eat," answered Healy.

"Shut the belly-acher up," cried someone, from the crowd. "He's just sore because Noyo didn't give him a cigar."

Rocklin saw that the man who had called out was a waiter. At this same moment, Mojave Keller came in through the batwing doors. Without actually turning his face in that direction, Kane let his gaze flicker toward the sheriff, catching his eyes obliquely for a moment. Mojave moved left from the doors, toward the velvet hangings.

"I want an answer, Noyo," insisted Healy, elbowing his way to the bar

through the crowd. "Food's high enough as it is. I know the kind of tolls you'll charge. Rot-gut bar whiskey is selling for a dollar a shot in 'Frisco. You're charging three here."

"Now, Mike, you know the Toll House Inn is controlled by 'Frisco capital," Kane told him.

"Of which you own controlling interest," answered Healy. "Morgan Rocklin is the only man in this town who has a clear picture of this thing, and you won't let anybody read his paper. I want you to give it to the boys straight tonight. I'm here to see that you do." He vaulted onto the bar himself, and wheeled toward the crowd, a shaggy, mop-headed figure of a man in a rough canvas mackinaw and earth-stained denims, snow-powdered boots laced to the knees.

"I know there's a lot of you here who haven't been bought out yet, and I'm talking to you. I run a big crew down in the Double-Zero, and I'm not going to let my boys get sucked in on something that means their bread and butter. If Pease gets elected it'll be because Kane's bought half your votes and scared the other half of you into voting. All he wants Pease in there for is to stop the bond issue for Luther Pass. How can a road through Noyo Canyon boom Volcano? It's already a boomtown. All the Noyo Canyon road'll boom is Kane's pockets."

"Ah, shut the strawboss up, his shoring's buckling," shouted someone.

Rocklin saw Kane's eyes mark down the man who had yelled, and then another one, and as he looked at each one, they started yelling and jostling. Rocklin came to his feet with a sense of crisis. A miner named Carrig began tugging at Healy's feet. Healy's well-known temper flared into his face, and he started kicking wildly at the man.

"Let me talk, damn it," he shouted.

"You've had your say," answered Carrig, reaching up to grab Healy's coat

and pull him down. Other hands yanked at his legs. With a roar of rage, Healy pulled at his gun. Carrig released him and stepped back to draw also. A surprised look crossed Healy's face, and he opened his mouth to shout something. Two shots blotted out his words, coming one right after the other. Healy hung there on the bar a moment, mouth still open. Then he toppled off into the crowd. Rocklin ran from his table, shouldering through the milling mob of men in time to see a man kneeling beside Healy's body.

"He's dead."

There was a murmur from the crowd. It did not hold much shock, or surprise. They were used to seeing men die violently. Carrig turned from side to side, smoking gun still in his hand.

"He went first, didn't he? You saw that. He pulled it out first. What else could I do?"

"Sure thing, Carrig," Kane told him, from up on the bar. "Mike shouldn't have gone for his gun. Clear case of self-defense, wouldn't you say, Mojave?"

"Clear case of self-defense," Mojave Keller echoed, from right at Rocklin's shoulder. Rocklin wheeled, surprised to find the man so close. Mojave's tawny eyes met his without expression.

"Couple of you boys take care of Healy, will you?" Kane shouted. "Rest of you have a drink on the house. We'll toast the poor man. A toast to Mike Healy—from Noyo Kane."

CHAPTER TWO

Bullet Deal

MORGAN ROCKLIN rose early the morning after Mike Healy's death. He could eat nothing. At nine, he went to the office of Doctor Benjamin Welles, a musty suite of rooms over one of the ramshackle saloons in the

more squalid district of Volcano. From the windows here, the adits of the Double-Zero mine were visible, with their countless ore cars pulled up on sidings, piled with the dank ore till they looked like lines of swollen slugs out of the earth. The doctor was a dried-up little man with a fuzzy mop of white hair and water-gray eyes. He was not glad to see Rocklin.

"You made out the death certificate for Mike Healy?" the editor asked.

Welles cleared his throat. "Death by gunshot wound."

"Obviously. Which bullet killed him, doctor?"

"Either could have."

"I saw the body, doctor. A layman can't tell much about wounds, but it looked to me as if one of those bullets struck him in the knee and came out high at the back of his thigh. That would be the one from Carrig's gun. That wouldn't kill a man, would it?"

"What do you mean, the one from Carrig's gun?"

"I mean Carrig only shot once."

The doctor frowned, swung his swivel chair around so he could look out the window. "I think you're mistaken, Rocklin."

"The holes from the other bullet were high in the chest, in front, and almost down at his rump in back. That couldn't have come from Carrig's gun, doctor, either way."

"What are you getting at, Rocklin?"

"You know what I'm getting at. Healy didn't pull his gun to shoot anybody. He just meant to fire it off at the ceiling and quiet that mob. He didn't even have it pointed at Carrig. He was surprised when Carrig drew."

Welles made a rough sound in his throat again. "You want to be careful, Rocklin."

"Has Kane paid you off, too?" Rocklin asked, "or are you just afraid?"

The doctor turned to him, lips parted in a faint, surprised denial, but Rocklin

wheeled disgustedly and walked out, realizing he could get no more from the man.

He found Marcia Ashford was waiting in front of the *Voice's* office. He unlocked the front door, letting them both in, and when he turned from closing it, she looked up at him.

"Rocklin, have you written your editorial for today?"

"Part of it," he said. "I don't think Carrig killed Healy at all, Marcia. His gun wasn't clear of its holster when that first shot came. When Carrig did shoot, it only hit Healy in the leg. It was the other bullet that killed Healy."

"But they both came from Carrig's gun."

"That's what everybody else thinks," said Rocklin. "But the angle of that second bullet is such that it couldn't have come from Carrig's gun. Healy was shot in the back, Marcia. Healy was murdered. He'd been a thorn in Kane's side too long. He was getting dangerous. They planted this, knowing his temper."

Her eyes darkened. "That's an awful accusation, Rocklin, without definite proof. Nobody else is talking that way this morning. Won't you calm down a little and think about it? Come into the kitchen and let me make you some coffee. I'll bet you haven't even had breakfast yet."

"I couldn't eat."

"See how upset you are? Don't you think you're letting your hatred of Kane sway you again? Remember, I was there last night, and I didn't see anything that would make me suspect Healy was murdered. Carrig isn't connected with Kane in any way."

"Carrig was a goat just as much as Healy . . ." He trailed off, shaken by her words. Frowning, he followed her into the kitchen, trying to resolve his thoughts.

"Come out of it now, Mr. Rocklin," Sin Bodie said from the door.

ROCKLIN reached for his gun with impulsive reaction, but it was useless anyway. Sin Bodie had his gun clear out this time, pointed at Rocklin.

"Will you get his gun, Miss Ashford?" Bodie murmured.

Marcia slipped Rocklin's Navy from its holster. He had looked at Bodie in that moment, but now he turned back to Marcia, as the full significance of this reached him, and rage began to blot out the blank surprise in him, began to pound hotly through his body till his pulse took up the beat of it. His voice was thick with it.

"I guess I should have known," he told her.

She looked at him with a wooden face, as if carefully blocking off expression. "I told you I thought you were wrong, Rocklin. They won't hurt you. They only want to stop the damage you're doing with this paper of yours."

"Sure thing, Rocklin," Noyo Kane said, walking in from the front office. He had a piece of paper in his hand, reading the writing on it with a grin. "I saw Noyo Kane murder a man at the Toll House Inn," he quoted. He rattled the paper. "This the editorial you were going to print today? Helluva thing to say, Rocklin, unless you have proof." He crumpled it into his hand, suddenly, with a strong decisive gesture, and flung it into the stove, turning to Rocklin. "Come into the press room. I want you to do something."

Rocklin looked bleakly at Bodie's gun, rose, and followed Kane stiffly into the other room. Mojave Keller stood beside the press.

"I understand you're a real speedy compositor," Kane told Rocklin. He seated himself at the swivel chair before the desk set against one wall, swung his feet up onto the railing, crossing them. He leaned his head back, staring at the ceiling. "I'll dictate. You set it up. Won't be long. Something like this: I realize I

have made a grave error concerning the proposed toll road through Noyo Canyon. Upon careful study and investigation, my conclusions are that it will truly benefit Volcano and every other town along the Placerville Road—" He stopped, looking at Rocklin with raised brows. "Well, hadn't you better start to work?"

"I won't print that," said Rocklin.

Kane's vivid, flashing eyes dropped to the gun in Sin Bodie's hand.

Rocklin understood the implication, and said, "That won't help. You'd do it after I printed up the statement anyway."

"Oh, no, Rocklin, no," Kane said, swinging his legs off the rail in mock horror. "We don't mean to get rid of you. You're too big a power in the community. I've seen too many men make martyrs of their enemies that way before. It's a mistake. It always backfires on them. A dead martyr often arouses the people much more than a live fool. I don't want to make a martyr out of you—" he grinned—"at least not that big a martyr." He leaned back in the chair, elbows on the arms, placing his fingers together in a steeple. "If you won't make a statement, what will you do?"

"Nothing, for you, Kane."

"That's what I thought. Fact is, I've given a lot of thought to it. When Sin and Mojave came in the other day, they just meant to wreck the press. But you got that gun of yours into it again, and it made me realize something had to be done about you, too. It brought my mind to your hands. You use them for the gun, don't you? And to set type with? If you didn't have them, you wouldn't be able to use the gun. Or to set type. The things that make you so dangerous would be nullified. Toss me your gun, Sin."

Bodie casually threw the revolver to him. Kane caught it deftly, turned it to Rocklin, made a little jerk with the tip of the barrel.

"Kane," said Marcia, sharply.

Mojave came in from one side, Sin from the other. Even under the threat of that gun, Rocklin could not block his impulses. He wheeled toward Sin, trying to block the man's out-thrust hand. Mojave caught his elbow from behind, wheeled him back in toward the press. Sin swept Rocklin's free, flailing arm aside and swung in with a knee that caught him deep in the stomach. He doubled over, incapacitated. Mojave yanked him forward and he grabbed wildly at the press to keep from falling. Both hands hooked over the edge of the bed. Mojave caught one, Sin caught the other, pulling them onto the top of the bed. For that moment, they were splayed out there, and Rocklin was too dazed, too sick, to realize what they intended.

Sin caught the chill, shoving against the long, elbow-shaped bar with all his weight. This brought the heavy platen down against the bed with a thudding clang. Rocklin felt his hands spread out, the sickening pain of mashed flesh and bone. He went to his knees beside the press, almost fainting with the excruciating agony.

"Kane," screamed Marcia. "Kane!"

"Very well, Sin," Noyo Kane said. "You can let it up, now."

"Yes, Mr. Kane," Sin murmured. As soon as he released the chill, the helical spring at the head of the press pulled the platen off Rocklin's hands. He was still too dizzy with pain to move. He crouched there with his crushed hands spread out on the bed, eyes squinted shut.

"I guess that will be all," Kane said, rising. "I guess we don't even need to bother with the press. He won't be able to set up type for a long time."

"Kane," cried Marcia, in a broken voice. "You promised you wouldn't hurt him. You promised—"

"Take it easy, pretty thing," chuckled

Kane. "You're not that dumb. Good day, Mr. Rocklin."

Rocklin heard them tramp out of the office. Then there was a muffled sobbing behind him. He felt Marcia's hand on his shoulder.

"Rocklin, let me help you, I'll get the doc—"

"Get away from me," he said, in a guttural, awful voice. "I don't want your kind of help. I wonder what they would have named Judas if he'd been a woman?"

THE first blasts of winter spent their fury on Volcano and left it a huddled whitened camp beneath the bleak mountains. Much of the work in the mines was halted, and many of the miners left for Marysville or 'Frisco or the other lower towns. Elmer Pease was elected to the county board by a big majority, and his vote swung the choice from Luther Pass to Noyo Canyon. And Morgan Rocklin was just reaching the point where he could drink his own coffee again by catching the cup between the heels of both hands and lifting it.

Doctor Welles had treated his hands, that day, when Rocklin had finally recovered enough to get to the man's office. The doctor told him he would probably never regain the use of his fingers. But each night he spent long hours massaging them and sweating over the force of will it took to try and bring movement to them again.

He rented the front part of his office out to a lawyer, but that did not give him enough to live on, and when the money he had saved ran out, he sought a job. He finally talked the owner of one of the cheaper bars at the south end of Redpine into giving him a job as a swamper. He had the bootmaker rig him an ingenious leather harness for his wrists fitted up with a hook by which he could carry the pail, and a pair of bands he could buckle onto the mop or

broom. He practiced with this on the day before he went to work, until he was quite adept. His job began about one in the morning, after most of the customers had left. It was a squalid dive, with splintered, unpapered walls of rough boarding through which the wind whistled mournfully. There were a few booths down one wall, a bar at the back, half a dozen round tables for drinking and gambling along the other side. He took little notice of the few remaining patrons, as he started shoveling fresh sawdust onto that already covering the floor. He got by the first two booths, and set his bucket of clean sawdust by the third, starting to spread another shovelfull, when his eyes caught on the man and woman sitting in the booth.

The man was babbling inanely; then he put his head down on the table and stayed motionless. The woman was Marcia Ashford. She met Rocklin's eyes with a stiff, pale face, in which there was no apology. Loss of weight had robbed her statuesque body of its beauty; there were hollows under her cheeks, and her eyes looked tired.

"What's the matter," asked Rocklin, thinly. "Kane kick you out?"

"I quit," she told him.

He frowned at her, trying to feel the hatred he should feel, trying to revive the rage he had known that night. But it did not come.

"Why?" he asked.

She turned her eyes up to him, allowing emotion to show a wide, luminous, tortured light. "Kane promised me they wouldn't hurt you, Rocklin. Just take your press away. Not even wreck it. Just take it away till this business about the road was over."

He frowned at her, suspicion hardening his mind. She looked at the miner with his head lolling on the table.

"Do you know who this is?" she asked Rocklin.

Rocklin glanced at the man, recognizing him now. "Norton Brand. He's changed a lot. When I worked with him in the Double-Zero, he never touched liquor."

"He's got something on his mind," she said. "He's trying to escape it. But he can't, even in drink. He comes in here a lot. He needs somebody to mother him. I've heard the story so many times I know it backwards, Rocklin, but I haven't known what to do about it." She prodded Brand. "Tell me again, Norton. Where was he standing?"

The man raised his head, foggy-eyed, slack mouth working. "Right over there in the curtains. Saw him plain as day. When Healy pulled his gun, Carrig thought he was throwing down, and pulled his gun too. But before he even had it clear, Mojave Keller shot Healy in the back."

He started blubbing weakly, and his head sank forward into his arms again. Rocklin stared at the man, excitement stirring at him. Then that suspicion blotted it out. He could not help remembering how he had let down his guard with this woman before.

"From what Doctor Welles said, I thought you'd never be able to get beyond lifting by the heels of your hand," she said.

He set his shovel down, looking at his hands. "I've been working at my hands. Massage. Hot water. I've made some progress. Some day I'm going to set type again. Some day—"

"You're going to hold a gun again?"

He raised his eyes. "Maybe." Then he carefully took up his shovel, forced to use both hands, this time, and began to work. "But it will be a long time."

"Wouldn't it be quicker if someone else massaged you?" she said. "You certainly don't have the strength in your hands themselves to do very much. We could work the thing out together."

He looked up in surprise. There was a strange, eager look to her face.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"You've never had any actual proof to use against Kane. It's always been talk and rumors and accusations you couldn't back up in court. Almost everybody in town knows Kane was buying votes but you could never get hold of anybody who'd swear to it in court. They know he was beating men if they wouldn't vote, and coercing them. There are even a few, like myself, who suspect Healy was murdered. That's still not enough. Brand is apparently the only one who actually saw it."

"You mean put him on the witness stand?" he said. "That would only prove Mojave Keller shot Healy. How could you prove Keller was working for Kane?"

"He was with Sin Bodie when they smashed your hands, wasn't he?" she said.

"That's only my word," he answered. "We'd need something that would stand up in court."

Her eyes narrowed speculatively. "Kane never will trust anybody to handle his money, not even his own lawyers. When I worked at the Toll House Inn, my check was always signed with his name."

That immense excitement swelled within him again, and he rose, pacing across the room. "And if he paid Keller the same way—" He broke off with a shake of his head. "That's no good. McReady's president of the bank and he and Kane are thick as molasses. Probably nobody but McReady ever sees Kane's checks."

"On the other hand," she said, "if there were someone in the bank who wasn't under Kane's thumb, and who could get hold of a check like that—" She smiled at the sharp look he gave her. "There's a young teller," she murmured, "by the name of Anderson. He used to come to the Toll House to see me quite

often. He had a great admiration for you, Rocklin. I think he had a secret yen to be a journalist."

"Anderson?"

"Arvid Anderson," she said. "He has a shack up at the head of Horse Tail Gulch."

HORSE TAIL GULCH lay about a mile out of Volcano, one of the innumerable chasms that ran back into the mountains from the bowl in which the town lay. Its steep, rocky walls were scarred by rotting flumes and snow-filled adits from the earlier mining operations of the pick-and-panners and the Coyoters who had worked the surface of these hills before the big operators came in to dig deep. Rocklin got a horse from the livery stables about five o'clock in the afternoon of the same day he had talked with Marcia, and took a round-about trail to the gulch.

There was still a vague, unreasoning suspicion of the woman's motives in his head, but the idea she had planted in his own mind would not let him rest till he had resolved its possibilities. It was a hard, cold ride, forcing the sluggish mare through the drifts along the trail. Finally he sighted the dilapidated log cabin, set up on a bench in a stand of snow-pitched fir. There were fresh tracks before the door, and he guessed that Anderson had just come home from the bank. He hitched the mare to a tree, knocked at the door with the heel of his mittened hand. A muffled voice asked who it was.

"Morgan Rocklin," he said.

There was a space of silence. Then footsteps sounded across a rattling floor, and the door was flung open. Arvid Anderson was a tall, painfully thin young man in a shapeless turtleneck sweater and frayed plaid trousers. His eyes were sunken and feverish, and there were dark hollows beneath his high, oblique cheek-

bones. He did not try to hide the surprise in his face.

"I'd like to talk with you," Rocklin told him.

Anderson backed into the room. "Come in, Mr. Rocklin. I'm hardly prepared for anyone. I just got back from the bank."

Rocklin stepped inside, shoved the door shut against the cold. "Never mind," he smiled, glancing around. "You have a nice place here."

The boy shook his head, smiling hesitatingly. "Thanks, but it's just an abandoned miner's shack I fixed up. Man on my salary can't afford to live in town. Let me build a fire."

While he stooped over the makeshift stove made of old tin cans and discarded pieces of metal from the mines, Rocklin walked to a rough plank table set in one corner, fingering the pile of paper there.

"Been writing?"

The boy looked over a shoulder at him. "Trying to. You remember when I came to you asking for a job."

"I'm sorry I couldn't hire you then, Arvid," Rocklin told him. "I wasn't in any position to hire help, even on the terms you offered."

"Why not be honest, Mr. Rocklin," Anderson told him. "You didn't think my writing was worth it."

Rocklin shrugged. "All right. But maybe you've improved. Mind if I read some of your stuff?"

"I'd be proud if you would. It's just some paragraphs I've been doing for the *Sierra Democrat* in Downieville. Edler said he'd like some news of what's going on in Volcano, since you stopped publishing the *Voice*."

Rocklin read a few lines about some new mining equipment the Double-Zero had installed. "Isn't this pretty insipid stuff?" he asked. "Sounds like a woman's gossip column. Why don't you write about the cave-in at the Red Nugget last week. Eleven men killed. Faulty shoring

that the miners have been complaining to Kane about for months. There's meat in something like that."

Anderson stood up from lighting the fire. "Kane isn't the only one who has money in the Red Nugget. McReady bought in last year. If he found out I was exposing stuff like that he'd fire me from the bank on the spot."

"Sure, sure," said Rocklin, rising restlessly. "Takes a little guts to be a newspaperman, Arvid. I wouldn't want anybody working with me who didn't have the courage to write what he saw."

An eager light filled Anderson's eyes. "You mean you need someone?"

Rocklin looked at his hands. "I can't do much this way." He raised his eyes, meeting Anderson's fully. "Your writing has improved, Arvid."

The boy's face flushed; he could hardly get the words out. "Mr. Rocklin, if I thought I could work for you . . ."

"You know what kind of stuff you'd have to write."

"I wouldn't care. I'd give up my job at the bank in a minute." He made a disgusted sweep of his hand. "The hell with McReady."

"On the contrary," Rocklin told him. "I'd want you to keep your job." He turned away, pacing to the stove, warming his hands over it, dubious about revealing the whole thing, finally deciding on the truth of it. "We have a witness who saw Mojave Keller shoot Healy in the back, Arvid. We know Mojave's connected with Kane, but we want proof. Does McReady handle Kane's account personally?"

"Nobody else even sees it."

"We thought it would be that way. Is there a possibility you could get hold of one of those checks from Kane to Mojave?"

Anderson's voice was dubious. "I don't know, Mr. Rocklin."

"Forget the mister." Rocklin wheeled

on him. "Doesn't Kane have most of his money in San Francisco? The checks would have to go through the clearing house down there, wouldn't they? Couldn't you get to them when the mail comes in? Even if you had to get hold of an envelope and steam it open."

The appalling possibilities of that showed in Anderson's eyes, and he shook his head. "I don't know. That isn't writing. You told me—"

"I told you I wanted a man with guts."

The boy shook his head, a fearful, withdrawing stoop to his shoulders. "But—"

There was a smashing blow against the door, swinging it open. A blast of wind hissed against the stove's glowing surface, and Rocklin wheeled to see Sin Bodie outlined in the opening, losing none of his impeccably tailored lines in the greatcoat he wore.

"But what, Mr. Anderson?" he asked, politely.

The boy's face was a dead white study. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Bodie walked in, nodded at Rocklin with a pleasant smile. Mojave Keller followed. All the blood was whipped from his beefy face by the wind and chill, and he stopped within the door, shivering in his heavy plaid mackinaw, swinging his arms back and forth across the front of him and staring in unveiled hostility at Rocklin. Bodie had moved casually to the table, removing the mitten from his right hand to flutter the papers.

"Mr. Rocklin trying to get you to do some newspaper writing for him, Mr. Anderson?"

"No—" the boy's voice left him in a choked way—"Listen. No. He was just up here about his bank balance."

BODIE turned to look at Rocklin, moving his head waggishly from side to side. "We know we can expect the truth from you, Mr. Rocklin. You have such a reputation for the truth."

Rocklin stared at them, wondering just how much they had heard from outside. He shrugged, deciding to play along with it for Anderson's sake. "All right. So I was trying to get his help. He wouldn't give it."

"Boy's smart," growled Keller.

"He is, at that," smiled Bodie. "However, we'd like to have a little talk with him, Mr. Rocklin, if you'd care to excuse yourself."

"I'll go, if you give me your word you won't hurt him."

Bodie's eyes raised in mild surprise. "My word? You honor me, Mr. Rocklin."

"Bodie," Rocklin told him. "I despise you. However, I have faith that once you give your word, you'll keep it."

Rocklin wheeled, with the sight of Mojave Keller burgeoning up against him, a gun raised in that unmitten hand to strike his head. He threw himself in under the blow, one shoulder smashing

into Mojave's thick belly. The descending arc of the gun took it past his head, his shoulder, to strike his ribs. Still on one knee, Rocklin hurtled himself at the man's legs. It knocked Mojave off balance, and he crashed heavily into the bunk, sitting down on it.

"You're so clumsy, Mr. Keller," Bodie said, in a soft, unconcerned voice, from behind Rocklin. The editor whirled, to see a gun in Bodie's hand too. He could not block this blow. It caught him neatly on the side of his head. He felt himself fall against the bunk sideways, and roll off that into a heap on the floor, wedged in against the corner of the bunk and the wall.

"Don't hit him again, Bodie," shouted Anderson, from somewhere, in a shrill, terrified voice.

It was then that Rocklin felt the anger. He pushed himself away from the wall, twisting so that his motion put his head

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and the upper part of his body beneath the top of that rickety table. He saw Bodie turn to follow the movement, and then stop his downcoming blow as the table blocked him off from Rocklin's head. At the same time, Rocklin caught at the table leg with both hands, and came up to his feet beneath it. The table tilted off him toward Bodie, and he heaved it on toward the man with a heavy grunt.

Bodie tried to dodge it, but the planks struck him in the chest and face, knocking him backward into Mojave, who had just risen off the bunk. The table fell away from the two tangled men to one side, leaving them clear for Rocklin, as he jumped them, bulling into them with his whole body. They were both off balance, and it knocked them back into the bunk. Unable to make a firm enough fist with his hands, Rocklin let himself sprawl full length across Mojave and twisted from one side to the other smashing his right elbow into the man's face, then his left, with all his weight on top of it.

Bodie tried to roll over, catching a leg to trip him. Rocklin tore the leg free, stamped at the man's elbow. Bodie screamed in pain, snapping over with his face into the wall so he could hug the arm in against the belly, his whole body rigid with a spasm of agony. Rocklin backed away, reaching for air with great, gasping breaths, black hair down over his eyes, his face a vicious, set mask. He saw Mojave kneeling beside the bunk, head bowed, blood streaming through the fingers of the hands he held over his face.

"Pick up that gun, Arvid," gasped Rocklin.

The boy complied, staring wide-eyed at him. Then Rocklin backed against the wall for support, and turned on Mojave and Bodie.

"Now get out of here, and don't ever let me see you near this boy again. I'll come after you if you so much as touch him. Either of you."

Mojave rose, stumbling to the door, pawing at his bloody face. Bodie's lips were compressed with pain, and he still held his arm in tight against his belly. He got to his feet and walked out slowly.

"I guess I was wrong, Anderson." He faced about to walk heavily for the door. "I'm sorry. Forget I ever came here."

CHAPTER THREE

Loser Take All

ROCKLIN did not see Marcia until two days later. She was not at the saloon when he went to work. It was nearly ten in the morning of the second day when he finished cleaning up, and went back to the office for his breakfast. He opened the door to the smell of bacon and coffee, and the sight of a fresh red-and-white checkered cloth on the table, under plates and utensils. She came to him from the stove, a flushed, expectant eagerness in her face.

"I couldn't make it till now," she told him. "I was even afraid to go to work last night, Rocklin. Kane's had a man trailing me. I think he's suspicious that something's come up. Did you see Anderson?"

Her voice fluttered off at the expression in his face. He just stood there, looking at her, with a dull, unresponsive woodenness to his features. He could not even feel anger, now—just a vast defeat.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Don't you know?"

"No, Rocklin, of course not—" she began, in puzzled, vehement denial. Then her voice faded, as her eyes settled on the bruise darkening a cheekbone. She reached up hesitantly, almost fearfully to touch it. "You've had a fight. Not with Anderson? Bodie? Did you fight with Sin Bodie?"

"And Mojave Keller," he told her.

The knock on the door cut Rocklin off,

startling him. He wheeled, looking at the door, then at Marcia, finally at his hands. When he lifted his eyes again to her, she was looking at him with chin lifted, a wide, luminous resolve in her eye. She wheeled sharply, going to her large bag lying on a chair. From this she took a heavy Paterson five-shot, holding it to her side at arm's length.

"Come in," she said.

The door was pushed open. Arvid Anderson stood there, muffled to the chin in a faded greatcoat, still shivering in the chill. He moved into the room, looking from Marcia to Rocklin. Then he removed one hand from its pocket in the coat. In it was an envelope. He laid it on the table.

"You'll find two canceled checks made out to Mojave Keller by Noyo Kane in there. McReady was out today. I had a chance to get into the safe where he keeps Kane's account."

Swiftly Rocklin opened the envelope, took the checks out, scanned them. Then he looked at Anderson.

The boy's eyes were almost angry. "I want to work with you, Mr. Rocklin. You left it up to me. It's out of your hands now. I've made my choice. I want to work with you—I don't care what you have me doing. I don't care about my job in the bank."

Rocklin felt something tingle up his back, but it was Marcia who spoke. "Are you sure they don't suspect you?"

Anderson turned to her. "I don't think so. Apparently Bodie and Mojave heard only enough of my talk with Mr. Rocklin to get the idea that he was asking me to help him get out the paper. McReady had me into his office yesterday, questioning me about it. I think I gave him a pretty good picture of a man who wouldn't have the guts to help Mr. Rocklin buck the whole town. He seemed satisfied."

"I think you're right," Rocklin said. "They wouldn't have let you get this far if

it were some kind of a trap. These checks in my hands are too dangerous. Do you realize what we have here, Anderson? We've got the witness who saw Mojave Keller shoot Healy, and these checks are positive proof that Kane is paying Mojave off. It's a link that could smash Kane if we can ever get it to court."

"The circuit judge won't be here for months," Marcia said.

Rocklin turned to pace across the room in growing excitement. "That doesn't matter. We'll take it right down to San Francisco. It goes beyond a mere murder trial. The state has interests in this road. As soon as it's proved that Healy's murder is connected with Kane's effort to run this road through his canyon, we'll have an investigating committee from the state senate blowing the whole thing wide open. The main thing right now is to get Norton Brand out of the way. Apparently Kane doesn't know about Brand yet, but as soon as this pops, he's liable to find out, and he'll be quite capable of killing the man to keep him from testifying."

"That's already done," Marcia told him. Rocklin wheeled to her in surprise, drawing an impulsively triumphant smile. "I've got him out at my uncle's place, twenty miles from here," she said. "It's just a shack, but nobody even knows I've got an uncle, and Brand will be safe there till we need him."

"You. . ." Rocklin could say no more for a moment, staring at her. Finally he murmured. "I'm sorry, Marcia."

"Forget it," she told him, huskily. "You had every right to be suspicious."

Rocklin looked at her for another space, then faced Anderson. "You see what you've gotten yourself into. We have to hide one man to keep him from being killed. You still have a chance to step out, Anderson."

The boy grinned, flushed and excited. "When do we print the first edition?"

For the first time in a long while, Rock-

lin laughed, a hearty, spontaneous laugh that rolled from deep within him. "We'll set it up right now," he said, "before I leave for 'Frisco. I'll put the evidence in hands of the court down there and get the indictment sworn out against Kane. He's got enough connections to hear about it before they serve the warrant, and he'll probably be after this press. He can have it, then. We'll have the paper already printed and ready to pass out as soon as I return from 'Frisco."

Anderson struggled out of his coat, turning with hungry young eyes to the old Albion press in the corner. "I've never done any composing, but I'll bet I can set up the type for you if you tell me how."

"Open up those type cases piled beside the press," Rocklin told him, in the fever of the excitement he always felt with an explosive story. "Place them on that sloping shelf with your upper case letters on top. There's a bucket of composing sticks underneath the press. Let's see." Hand in pocket, he turned to pace across the room. Then he held up thumb and forefinger, sweeping an imaginary banner through the air. "How's this for a headline? 'To the murderer of Mike Healy.'"

"Very dramatic," Marcia told him. "But first, Anderson will have to have copy to read from."

Rocklin's shoulders sagged. "Of course. I forgot."

He looked at his hands.

"Never mind, Rocklin," Marcia told him. "You have hands now." She rose, finding pencils and paper at the desk, and sat down there, looking toward him. "Why not write the same one you had started that day Kane and Bodie and Mojave came here to smash your hands? I liked the way it began."

He looked at the ceiling, excited little lights kindling in his eyes. "Why not? Take this down. 'I saw Noyo Kane murder a man at the Toll House Inn. He didn't have the gun in his hand. He didn't

pull the trigger. But I saw Noyo Kane murder a man . . .'"

IT WAS almost dark when they had finished. They were drained empty by the hours of exhausting, nerve-wracking work—but the paper was printed. There were a hundred copies with that damning editorial flung the length and breadth of the first page, specifying the proof, this time, and Kane's connection with Mojave Keller. Rocklin made both Anderson and Marcia promise they would take the papers and go to her uncle's cabin up in the hills, till he got back from San Francisco. He meant to get a horse at the livery and reach Downieville in time to get the midnight stage for San Francisco. After a hurried supper, he asked Anderson to get his traveling bag from the front section of the office, where he had it stored in a closet. As soon as the boy was out of the room, Rocklin turned to Marcia. They stood looking at each other without speech, until he finally spoke.

"There's so much I want to say. I don't know how to start."

She put her hand on his wrist, warm and reassuring. "There will be time, Rocklin, when you get back."

"Rocklin—" Anderson's voice was sharp, as he re-entered the room with the bag—"Bodie's across the street. I just saw McReady leave him."

Rocklin saw the shock of it widen Marcia's eyes, before he turned to look at Anderson. None of them spoke for a moment.

"Think they've found out the checks are missing?" asked Rocklin, at last.

"It's possible," Anderson told him, in a tight, scared voice.

"Then they know something's up," Rocklin said. "Give me the papers. Pile as many as you can into my bag. I'll take the rest under my arm. I won't have them find you with anything like this in your hands. They'd kill you in a minute."

Marcia caught his arm. "But Rocklin—"

"You either," he told her. "I'll take the checks, too. If they know about them, they'll trail me away from this office as soon as I leave. You watch out the front window. As soon as Bodie follows me out of sight, leave by the back way and go straight down the alley out of town. You should be able to make it to Red Low on foot. Wait there till you've heard what's happened here. If I get away, I'll send you word. If I don't—you'd better not try to come back to Volcano." He wheeled to see the tortured look in Marcia's eyes, and his voice grew hard. "It's the only way, Marcia. We can't hide in here forever."

"But you can't go out there—"

"I won't let either of you do it, I told you that," he said. He looked down at his hands. Then he walked over to the desk, opened the drawer, took out his swivel-holstered gun, with the cartridge belt wrapped about the case. He unwound this and pulled the Navy revolver free. He counted the seconds that his hand would support it. One, two, three, and then his fingers gave way, and he had to catch it with his other hand to keep it from dropping.

"Will you buckle the holster on me?" he asked Marcia.

"Rocklin," she kept saying, over and over, in a choked little voice, "Rocklin—"

Shadows lay blue against the snow, huddled in corners, thrown carelessly at the foot of walls. As Rocklin turned down the alley, he caught a furtive movement at its lower end, and turned to see Mojave Keller, barely recognizable in the darkness.

"Rocklin," called the man. "Hold up."

Rocklin broke into a heavy run, half-turned to keep the sheriff in sight. One of the newspapers slipped from under his arm into the snow. He halted with the impulse to step back after it. Then he saw Mojave fumbling beneath his mackinaw for a gun, and realized he did not have the time. He wheeled back, running hard for the slot between his building and the next one, gained it just as Mojave's gun came out. Within its protection, he knew no regrets about losing the paper. Mojave would read it and know what it meant. It would put both of them on his trail, and he could lead them away from the office, from Marcia and the boy.

He ran heavily down the narrow slot between the buildings, catching sight of Bodie, across the street, as he came to the

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opening. Behind Rocklin, Mojave burst into the frame of the buildings, gun in one hand, newspaper in the other. Rocklin dodged around the front corner, once more blocking himself off from Mojave. He saw that Bodie had started to move, across the street, but the man did not have his gun out. Bodie was not yet in a position to see Mojave farther down that narrow slot, and did not know what Mojave knew about the papers. That would give Rocklin a moment.

HE REALIZED the pattern of their positions, now. They had him caught between them. Bodie blocked him off from reaching the opposite side of the street, and Mojave kept him from returning to the alley. Rocklin started to walk north along Redpine, keeping Bodie in his view. The other man walked in the same direction, paralleling him across the street.

Rocklin halted abruptly at the slot between the next two buildings. In another instant, he caught the furtive, shadowy appearance of Mojave Keller at its other end. The sheriff moved backward in an impulsive, guilty attempt to get out of sight, then halted that, and took another step that put him boldly into view. His gun was coming up, but Rocklin had already taken the stride that put him behind the building's corner, and continued on up the street.

Bodie, however, had paused, staring into the slot. Then, keeping his face turned toward Rocklin, he cut this way across Redpine and ducked into the passageway between the buildings, back of Rocklin. The editor realized Mojave must have signaled the man. Bodie would know, now, too, and Rocklin understood how it would be from here on out.

The smashing, crunching sound of running feet on the snow reached him from the alley-end, and Mojave Keller burst into view, gun held up for a throw-down

shot. Rocklin's palm angled the gun up in its holster and fired through the open tip, before Mojave's gun left his ear. Then he wheeled back the other way, with an impression of Sin Bodie burgeoning into the narrow frame at the street end, and the heel of his left hand slapped the hammer as many times as it could before his other hand would no longer support the weapon in firing position. He let the holster sag into place and threw himself flat on his face.

He lay there with the crazy echoes of gunfire still making a deafening chasm of the passageway. Before they died, he lifted his face from the snow to see Sin Bodie holding himself up against the wall of one building, down there at the street end of the slot. He did not look at Rocklin. He just sagged there, breathing in sick, wheezing gusts, hanging onto the building with one hand, hugging his other arm across his bloody belly.

Rocklin got to his hands and knees, looking the other way. Blood made a broad, dark stain in the snow at the end of the alley. He had hit Mojave, then, and the man had dragged himself off. Rocklin had an idea where he would go, if he could make it. He picked up his gun, saw that there were two unfired shells in the cylinder. At the end of the slot, he saw Mojave's dropped weapon, half-buried in the snow.

He followed the dragging, bloody footprints down the alley toward the Toll House Inn. He broke into a run, fighting the drifts, tearing out of his overcoat and dropping it into the snow. He reached the back stairs of the Inn, took them two at a time. There was blood on the fourth one, the seventh, at the top. The door was ajar. He followed the trail of blood down the thickly carpeted hall, blocking off his impulse to pull his gun free, knowing it would not even be three seconds that he could hold it up this time. The door of the office was at the exact center of this

hall, looking out onto the broad stairs that led down to the first floor. It was ajar, and he could hear the voices before he reached it.

"Blast you, Mojave, I told you not to show up here under any circumstances."

"I'm hit bad, Noyo, and you've got to take care of me."

"Where's Rocklin now?"

"I don't know. You were right about him. He must have had the checks. He'd already printed up some papers about it. The editorial claimed there was a witness that saw me kill Healy, and evidence linking you with me."

"And you left him out there with that, you came crawling to me—"

"I'm hurt, Noyo, dammit, get a doctor!"

"Not here. Get out, Mojave, come on—"

The two of them appeared at the door before Rocklin reached it. Kane was herding Mojave roughly into the hall. He wheeled, with sight of Rocklin, surprise stamped onto his broad face.

"I thought Mojave would come running to you when the chips were down, Kane," Rocklin told him. "I won't need to go to 'Frisco now. It'll be hard to keep those miners from lynching you, Kane, when they find Mojave here, and see those checks you wrote him."

Rocklin had halted in the center of the hall. Kane's eyes dropped to his hands, then lifted to Mojave.

"He couldn't," said Kane, in a husky voice. "His hands are smashed."

Mojave was bent helplessly over against the door-jamb, holding tight to a bloody thigh with both hands. "That's what I thought," he groaned.

"You fool," snarled Kane, and wheeled to haul Mojave across in front of him in the same instant that he pulled his gun from beneath a lapel.

Rocklin drew and fired before Mojave blocked Kane off. It smashed Kane around

in a half-circle. He stumbled forward, a blank, surprised look on his face.

Rocklin dropped his own gun into its holster before his fingers gave way. Keller had made no move. Now he slid down the wall to a sitting position, gripping his right shoulder tightly with his left hand, a sick, gray expression in his face. Rocklin walked to the head of the stairs to see a crowd welling in through the front doors. Marcia and Anderson were in the lead.

"I thought I told you to go to Red Low," he said.

"We couldn't, Rocklin," she told him.

"Bodie was still alive when I left him at the corner of the saddle shop," he said.

"I suppose he'll live," she told him.

"They've got him over at the doctor's."

Anderson was at his side, eyes glowing. "Can I pass out the papers now, Mr. Rocklin?"

"Kane's dead, isn't he?"

"Keller's still alive," the boy told him.

"I think the town ought to know about it. If you don't give them the facts, it will get twisted all out of shape by the talk."

"You're right, Arvid," grinned Rocklin. "Pass out the papers." Then he looked down at Marcia, murmuring. "You told me there would be time to say what I wanted, when I got back."

Her smile was radiant. "What do you want to say, Rocklin? You accused me of being Noyo Kane's girl, once, a long time ago."

"Was I right?"

"Maybe then. Not now. I'm Morgan Rocklin's girl now."

"I'd like you to be more than that—much more than that."

"Is this a place to talk about it?" she asked.

"Let's get away," he said. "My office. We'll be alone. Will you come with me?"

She put her hand in his, smiling. "All the way, Rocklin. Wherever you want to take me."

THE KID FROM

By
**CHARLES W.
TYLER**

"This is trail's end," they told the kid, "the place you've been look-in' for—where a slow man is a dead man—an' the fast can do no wrong!"

CHAPTER ONE

Trail City—Hell Town

MARKET SQUARE, Kansas City, was the cross-roads where the East met the West, where civilization ended and the raw frontier began. In Market Square men changed from buckskin and levis to broadcloth and string ties. They went to the best theaters and drank the best liquors; they gambled and danced and lived high.

They brought to Market Square a breath of trail dust and gunsmoke; they brought a little of Dodge and Newton and Caldwell and Trail City, a little of the rolor and sweep of broad horizons and blue nights under the stars.

Their talk was of an endless sea of grass and Texas cattle, and buffalo killing and man killing. And little Pete Cordrey listened, his head full of dreams.

His father had been killed in the war between the states; his mother had died when he was thirteen and he had been left to rustle for himself, a ragged, dirty waif of the Kansas City streets. He was just turning seventeen now, this Pete Cordrey—a freckled, peaked-faced kid with a cough.

Somewhere the undersized Pete had



rummaged a too-big flat-crowned hat and a scuffed pair of cowboy boots from an alley trash box. He wore them proudly, for to him they symbolized his heroes of the plains. With his scarecrow cast-offs, he was a familiar figure in Market Square. And they called him "Boots."

On sunny days when men were gathered on Tom Speers's bench in front of the police station Pete Cordrey was usually there, drinking in the conversation

HELL'S CORNER



Tresgus jerked to a half crouch, his gun swinging upward. . . .

avidly. At one time or another famous scouts and freighters and cattlemen and railroad builders were there—famous marshals, too—men like wild Bill Hickok and Wyatt Earp—and Smoky Smith.

Market Square also played host to another breed—sleek and hard-faced men, smooth-barked and crafty. Gun-toughs, shysters, Fancy Dans, and crooked gamblers—men who lived by their wits and

fast trigger-fingers. Men like Chilly Johnson and Wick Hyde and Rance Varell.

For all of the laughter and gayety in Market Square, there were also wicked eddies and undercurrents—old wounds unhealed, old scores, old hatreds.

It was summer now and the buffalo hunters were in town. From the talk Pete learned that the buffalo were in poor coat

in these summer months and that the hides were more valuable from September to March. The conversation dwelt on rising prices for hides and the buffalo migration from the northern plains as the herds moved south to winter in the river valleys of the Canadian, the Cimarron and the Arkansas. Fifty million buffalo, the hunters said, were on the prairies.

Of greater interest to Pete than the talk of buffalo were those discussions that concerned guns and gun-fighters—the types of weapons, the speed with which they could be drawn and fired.

Much of the talk centered about Trail City and the killings there. It was claimed to be the toughest town on earth, and a bad spot for the marshal Mayor Tom Moody had recently appointed, Smoky Smith.

"Smith has got the gun speed and the cold nerve to make some of them hard-cases crawl," Pete heard a man say, "but it's like to be a bullet in the back that will lick him."

There was talk then of Rance Varell, more talk of Smoky Smith. Their trails had crossed in those roaring towns where the cattle trails met railroad steel and the crossing was thin ice—thin and blue and cold, with death a silent river underneath.

One day Pete's hacking cough attracted the attention of a man on the bench by the police station, and he said, "That's a bad cough, Boots; you ought to go west. The dry air on the plains would be good for them lungs of yours."

"Doc Holliday was a lunger," another said. "He went west for his health, and look at him—they can't even kill him with a six-shooter."

There was a general laugh at this. The consumptive Doc Holliday, cold-nerve gambler and gun-artist, seemed indestructable. The name was one that Pete Cordrey had heard often around Market Square. Doc Holliday, famous for his

courage and known for his flaming Colt.

That day Pete Cordrey made his decision. He'd go and see for himself this strange, violent world beyond the Big Muddy. Mebbe it would help his cough; mebbe not. Anyhow, what was there to lose?

PETE CORDREY had his first look at Trail City when the night was beginning. He got down slowly from the train and stood for a long time on the station platform, absorbing the things he saw with a feeling of subdued excitement.

Roughly dressed men moved along the sidewalks, bearded men, leather-faced men, six-shooters slung at their hips. The broad horizons that had fascinated him during the train ride from Kansas City were suddenly narrowed into the tight limits of a false-fronted street, pulsing with the kind of fever boom towns are made of.

Trail City had reared its head out of the Kansas dust, a lusty infant, grown quickly into a swaggering, brawling tough, bragging of its wickedness. Frame structures had sprung up among the sod-dies—stores and saloons first, providing food and whiskey for the hordes of cowboys, buffalo hunters, gamblers, land sharks and camp followers. Housing facilities had followed in a more or less haphazard fashion.

The town in its boisterous growth had spilled across the track, with many of its more odious resorts thus separated from the main business sections. Socially, "south of the track" was as far away as the stars, and the railroad stood as the Dead Line. Here the roughs and trouble-makers were allowed pretty much free rein, but in the area of established business and residences to the north was a degree of orderliness which was the marshal's responsibility.

The railroad and the high cry of the

Iron Horse had come to Trail City, fore-runners of civilization, but for the present the law of the land rode in a man's holster.

It was Smoky Smith's custom to be at the station when the Kansas City train rolled in to look over the new arrivals. He saw Pete Cordrey and remembered him from his last visit to Kansas City.

Pete caught the glint of the star on the tall man approaching and his thin face lighted. "Hi!"

"Hullo, Boots. You're a long ways from home."

"Kinda."

"Well, what do you think of Trail City?"

"I dunno," Pete said doubtfully.

"What struck you to come out, kid?"

"Somebody said it was healthy for lungers out here."

"Well, perhaps," Smoky Smith said, "but those are about the only folks it is healthy for." He added, "How about having supper with me?"

"Gee, thanks."

They crossed from the railroad station to Trail Street and went along the sidewalk to Tom Neeley's restaurant. A girl came to their table and Smoky said, "Kit, this is Boots; he's just in from Kansas City."

The girl said, "My folks hailed from K. C. Put 'er there, partner. And what do they call you beside Boots?"

"Pete. Pete Cordrey."

"Fine. My mail comes to Allison. And what are you eating tonight, gentlemen?"

Kit Allison was pretty and looked twenty or so, Pete thought, but now and then some quality broke surface that made her seem older. Her hair was yellow and her eyes were blue as the Kansas sky.

After she had given their order at the slide she returned to stand regarding Pete soberly. "I've got a brother about your age." The blue eyes clouded.

Smoky Smith looked at her. "Heard from Jim lately?"

"No, and I don't expect to hear from him."

"Jim got a bad break," Smoky said.

The meal was nearly finished when there was the hard impact of a shot on the street. It was followed by a second and a third. A moment later a man came in, saying, "McAndow is out there, cuttin' him a piece of hell."

The girl frowned. "One of Varell's crowd."

Smoky Smith got to his feet and went toward the door. Pete looked after him. "What is it?"

"Trouble, kid, any way you look at it."

Pete remembered that there had been talk back in Market Square that Varell was gunning for Smoky Smith, and he was filled with anxiety.

"What are you going to do in Trail City?" the girl said.

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"I dunno, miss—most anythin', I guess." Pete coughed, grinned a bit ruefully. "If anybody will give me a job."

"Jordan is a hard old road, isn't it, Boots?" There was sympathy in the girl's eyes. "But you'll get by."

Smoky came back after a little. "Just whiskey and gunpowder," he said briefly.

"We going to find the kid a job?" Kit Allison said.

"We'll get him something," Smoky said, and to Pete, "Train fare must have put a crimp in your pocketbook."

"Some of the men around Market Square chipped in. Soon as I can I'm goin' to pay 'em back."

"That's right, kid," Smoky said. "Never forget a good turn—or a bad one."

"Take him down to Mother Grady's boarding house." Kit said. "I think she's got a room."

Later Pete learned that Kit Allison had paid his room rent for a week. When he thanked her, she said, "Bread on the waters, Boots. I've got a kid brother somewhere; maybe somebody will do him a good turn."

COAL OIL lamps spread a yellow glow across galleries and plank walks, shaping patterns of light in the blackness. Voices reached out from saloons. Somewhere a piano was pelting a gay melody.

Pete had come onto Trail Street's lower end, stopping for a little in front of Dan Kelly's famous Alamo Saloon. Back in Market Square he had heard a lot of the Alamo in the days when it had been called Hell's Corner. As he stood there the batwing doors slapped outward and four men came onto the sidewalk to stand in a tight group, conversing in low tones. Pete gave them little heed until he heard the name of Smoky Smith and something about Tom Neeley's place.

The four men moved on and Pete trailed along, startled thoughts running

through his mind. Smoky, making his rounds, dropped into the restaurant about this time in the evening for a cup of coffee.

It was Pete Cordrey's second week in Trail City, and he had heard a lot of talk about Rance Varell, the mayor of "Little Hell," south of the railroad track, and his gun-toting henchmen. Varell was lined up against the law-and-order crowd, and everybody knew that sooner or later there was going to be a showdown.

A short distance from Tom Neeley's restaurant two of the group that had come out of the Alamo crossed the street. Their companions stopped near the mouth of an alley adjoining the eating house. Pete pulled up in the shadows, watching. He felt that he should warn Smoky Smith, but he couldn't be sure that anything was really wrong; none of these men wore guns, that he could see.

Suddenly there were loud voices across the street, and a shot. One of the men by the alley moved on past the hitchrail. Smoky Smith came out of the restaurant to stand on the sidewalk. Beyond, a man came into the street, shouting oaths.

The tall marshal's voice cut at him. "I warned you to stay out of this part of town, McAndrew."

"To hell with you!"

There was a spurt of flame and the crash of a gun.

One of the saddle horses at the hitchrail staggered and fell with a high scream. The others were set to plunging. Smoky Smith moved out past them, snapping a six-shooter from his shoulder holster. The man called McAndrew broke back toward the far sidewalk. Pete saw a second man now out beyond the lurching ponies—the spare-framed man who had been at the alley's mouth—a gun in his hand. The shot he sent at the marshal was hurried and wide.

Smoky Smith came half around, his six-shooter blasting. The spare-framed

man, partly turned by the blow of the bullet, slumped down.

Pete Cordrey saw a figure coming from the pool of shadow by the alley, to stand beside a gallery post in the pattern of light cast by the window of the restaurant. The marshal had turned and was facing the threat in the shadows across the street.

This was a dapper little man, one of those who had stood in front of the Alamo, and his sharp eyes darted up and down the sidewalk in a quick survey, a gun leaping out from under his coat. Somewhere Pete heard a voice say, "Wick Hyde's gunnin' fer the marshal!"

Pete Cordrey's breath whistled through his teeth and his eyes widened. The thing had unfolded silently, quickly, like the rolling back of a curtain in a theater. It sent a cold chill down his back. He stared in horror at the swinging gun in the dapper man's hand, and then suddenly found himself in motion.

Smoky Smith had been good to him. In K. C. they had said, "It will be a bullet in the back that will lick him."

The distance was less than a dozen feet—a thousand miles straight across that bright patch of window light. The planking popped under the rush of the cast-off cowboy boots, the pale, peaked face beneath the floppy brim of the old flat-crowned hat was strained, tense. Somewhere there was a startled oath.

Wick Hyde whirled, his little shoe-button eyes shining wickedly. The gun shifted fast. The muzzle, big as a cannon mouth, turned rosy. The sound that reached Pete Cordrey seemed far away, but the tearing rush of the bullet that snatched at his coat was a close, frightening thing.

Before Wick Hyde could fire a second time the drive of his bony shanks had sent Pete in close. He tackled low and hard and the dapper little man crashed to the gallery floor, his sleek feathers

ruffled, a raging fury roaring through him. He chopped down hard with the gun barrel, a glancing blow that slapped off the flat-crowned hat.

The jarring impact of the fall knocked the black gun from Wick Hyde's grip and the weapon clattered to the planking. Pete let go his hold and scrambled after it. He stumbled to his feet, gustily dragging air into his sick lungs, his eyes bright with a dangerous fire.

Wick Hyde got up slowly, warily, all the time watching the kid, watching that unsteady gun-muzzle. He ventured a half step forward, cursing hoarsely.

Clutching the bone-handled grips with both hands, Pete dragged the hammer back. "Stay away from me or I'll kill you!" His voice was strained and sharp-pitched.

Wick Hyde's eyes turned to the forming circle of onlookers. "Take that gun away from the little fool!"

Someone laughed and a big, bearded man said gruffly, "Looks like ye got a wildcat by the tail, neighbor."

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Learning

THE decoys, having drawn Smoky Smith into the street, had disappeared, their part in the plot done. The marshal, turning back to the gallery, saw the kid framed against the window light.

"They was out to gang you, Smoky," Pete said, trying to swallow the throbbing fear in his throat.

Smoky Smith looked at Wick Hyde, his eyes cold and hard. "So you're lookin' for trouble?"

"I'm not looking for anything," Wick Hyde snarled, "but Frank Goren is a friend of mine. You didn't have no cause to gun him down."

"He got in the first shot," Smoky said.

Wick Hyde's features worked convul-

sively. "You start getting tough and hell is going to pop around your ears."

"There's going to be law and order on this side of the track as long as I'm marshal."

"You won't last," sneered Hyde. "Two Trail City marshals are in boothill an' a couple more quit."

"I'm going to let you cool your heels in the calaboose for a day or two."

Smoky Smith turned to Pete Cordrey. No longer was he a kid, this Boots of Market Square, but a man, facing the responsibility of his acts in a hell-roaring trail town where life was cheap.

This new, raw West was pitiless in its tempering process. It made a man or broke him. Pete had shown that he possessed courage, but at the same time a seed had been planted—a dangerous seed. For the first time in his life he had in his grasp something that gave the physical weakling equality—and that was a six-shooter.

The kid seemed dazed, bewildered, like a lost dogie caught in its first blue north-er, not knowing which way to turn. Slowly he let the gun-hammer down and stood holding the gun uncertainly, his eyes searching the staring faces. He looked at Smoky Smith. "What will I do with this?" He held out the six-shooter.

Smoky Smith wanted to tell Pete Cordrey to throw the gun to hell and get out of Trail City on the first train, but the words hung on his tongue. It was so easy for a man to be wrong. He owed his life to this kid and he wanted to give him some measure of protection or security, but nothing was certain in this gun-ridden town. He couldn't be sure even how long he was going to be around himself.

Kit Allison had come to stand in the doorway of Tom Neeley's restaurant, the glint of yellow light on her hair, a framed picture of a pretty girl on Trail Street's dark and ugly wall. Her slow glance

went from Pete Cordrey to Smoky Smith, her lips curling a little when she saw that he had no answer ready.

What would he do with the gun in his hand—this kid with his bad lungs?

Kit Allison gave Pete Cordrey his answer, a challenge flung into the teeth of Wick Hyde and the crowd South of the Track. "Keep it, Boots—and learn to use it!"

The quick, savage battle had left Pete with an empty feeling in his belly and a small, bright spark of terror in his mind, but the girl's cool voice steadied him. When you had the con what difference did it make anyhow?

A cough racked him. When the spasm had passed, Pete said, "I ain't never had no gun-learnin'—'cept what I got back in K. C., listenin' to men talk an' watchin' 'em shoot at a target. But I'll get onto it."

"One day," said Wick Hyde savagely, "I'll take that gun away from you an' beat your brains out with it!"

"Mebbe I'll be ready that day," Pete Cordrey said; "and mebbe I won't; but it will be a fight, mister."

BUFFALO GRASS spread its vast carpet from the Colorado River in Texas to Canada, some fifteen hundred miles long and five hundred miles wide. It covered the ground to a depth of close to six inches, its close-curved leaf an endless, nutritious mat. Year after year it renewed its growth in spite of continuous grazing and the trampling of the vast buffalo herds.

In the fall the buffalo began their southward migration, moving down from the Dakota plains, from Montana and Canada to the valleys of the Republican, the Coloman, the Cimarron, the Canadian and the Brazos. During this southward movement the shaggy beasts acquired their winter coats and their hides were prime for market. The hide-hunters out-

fitted and met the herds in Nebraska and followed them to the Panhandle, killing as they went. The slaughter continued from September to March, when the shaggy animals began their northward trek to the summer range.

It had been strongly in the mind of Smoky Smith to quit his job as city marshal, feeling that there were better ways of making a living than offering himself as a target for drunken punchers and Trail City gun-toughs for one hundred dollars a month, and he had talked to a man named Jack Gallagher about a hide-hunting expedition.

A four or five wagon outfit, Jack Gallagher had pointed out, with drivers, stocktender, cook and others, while better manned against Indian attack, cut considerably into the share the hunter took out of the venture.

"Against four or five wagons an' some twenty hosses," Jack Gallagher had said, "one wagon, a helper an' a skinner, to my mind, is more desirable. An' if the hunter ain't too damn proud to help with the skinnin' he stands to cut himself an even bigger slice of profit."

Jack Gallagher, a famous scout, was an authority on buffalo killing, and Smoky Smith considered his opinion worthy of thought. Later the marshal had broached the subject to Comanche Cooney, a former bullwhacker and plainsman.

"Sounds plausible," Cooney had said,

stroking his frazzled mustache. "Damn if it don't. Give a man more money to spend for whiskey."

Cooney was a more or less unbridled citizen, a dissolute and abandoned character when in town, but a man to ride the river with when industriously employed.

"You and I and one more could do it," Smoky said. "How about this fall?"

"Fall, hell," snorted Cooney. "Time to git started is 'fore the main herds begin comin' down from the north. When the critters git this fur south they been shot at so much they're gunshy." He wallowed his tobacco cud from one cheek to the other. "Thousands of buffalo stay the year round in the valleys on the northern edge of the Injun Nations. Mebbe not so many to shoot at but what they is is a hell of a sight easier to git within gunshot of."

This was shortly before the fight in front of Tom Neeley's. Afterward the thing had been in Smoky Smith's mind as he tried to decide what to do about Pete Cordrey. If the kid remained in Trail City he would never be safe from Wicky Hyde. He didn't want to go back to Missouri and sending him on to the end of steel didn't seem right.

At the present Wick Hyde was in jail and Frank Goren was laid up with a bullet wound in his shoulder. South of the Track, Rance Varell was talking tough and Mayor Tom Moody was troubled.

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Trail City politics were at the boil and the bushwhack attempt indicated the seriousness of the situation. Smoky Smith had put a curb on lawlessness by cooling a few of the hardcases with his six-shooter, but the thing was still a powder keg.

The law-and-order element, backing Tom Moody, while desiring the business the trail herds and the buffalo hunters brought, wanted something more. They wanted streets safe for their women, and some semblance of decency.

On the other hand Varell's crowd, backed by powerful saloon and gambling interests and some business concerns, felt that any attempt to put a damper on wild and woolly Trail City would detract from the town's general appeal, with the result that a lot of free-and-easy money would be lost and that the trail herds and the buffalo hunters would take their trade and their hell-raising elsewhere.

Immediately following the attempt to gun down Smoky Smith, Tom Moody had appointed two additional deputy marshals. But while Jack Rivers and Billy Camp were good men, Smoky felt they would do no more than delay the final bloody showdown.

So far as turning in his badge at this stage of the game was concerned, Smoky Smith considered that it would not only be an act of disloyalty to his friend, Tom Moody, but would give Varell reason to believe that he was yellow.

There seemed no alternative but to postpone the hide-hunting expedition, which left unsolved the problem of what to do about Pete Cordrey.

IT WAS old Comanche Cooney who offered a solution when Smoky Smith told of his decision to stay on as marshal.

"Stay here, if ye're a-mind to," said Comanche Cooney, "an' git yore belly full of lead, but ye git an outfit together an' me an' the kid will hunt buffalo."

"You mean that, Comanche?"

"Hell, yes."

"I'm afraid Pete won't be much help."

"He'll learn," rumbled Cooney.

"What about a skinner? No man in his right senses will tie up with an outfit that only has a hunter and a greenhorn kid for a camp helper."

Cooney screwed up one eye and gave Smoky a cunning leer. "Plenty skinnners sloshin' around in Trail City saloons. When were's ready to pull out I'll git one, don't ye fret about that."

"All right," Smoky Smith said, "it's a deal."

Trail Street was full of talk about the fight in front of Tom Neeley's. A strange triangle, they said: Smoky Smith, cracking the whip on the toughest town on the trail; and Boots, living on borrowed time, bracing the devil's own game; and Kit Allison, pretty as sunrise, with a no-good brother dodging a rope somewhere on the owlhoot.

Yes, and there were whispers too of old Comanche Cooney, a whiskey-guzzling reprobate in buckskin, with his necklace of withered Indian ears, having a finger in the pie.

When Christian Sharps made his first successful breech-loading, single-shot rifle he had contributed a weapon which Cooney, more than twenty years later, still regarded as the West's greatest buffalo gun and man-stopper.

Back in Market Square, Pete Cordrey had heard many a tale of Comanche Cooney and his .50 caliber Sharps. When first he met him at Cleberg's corral, he regarded the old plainsman with awe and wonder.

If Cooney entertained any doubts concerning this kid from Kansas City he kept them to himself. He squinted at Pete Cordrey, spat at a wagon wheel and slowly dragged the back of his horny hand across his tobacco-stained mouth.

"Howdy, pardner," he rumbled.

"Hullo, Mister Cooney," Pete said.

"Haw, perlite leetle cuss," said Comanche. "But ye'll outgrow it."

"Yes, sir."

"I guess ye're rarin' to go, an' kain't go fer rarin'."

"I dunno," Pete said.

"Jist a figger of speech, young un. Kin ye harness a hoss?"

"Sure," Pete said. "I used to chore around the livery stable in Kansas City. An' I drive pretty good."

"I swan," admired Comanche.

The outfitting was done now, and when Pete went to Tom Neeley's for supper that night he told Kit Allison that they would be leaving at daybreak.

The girl said with a small smile, "You will be a man when you come back, Boots."

When Pete was leaving, Kit Allison went to the door with him and stood for a long time, looking at him, and past him into the dark yesterdays of her life. Her father had been a slow, gentle man, with a dislike for violence. A gun was out of place in his hands and he had been killed in a fight that was forced on him. The thing had left its mark on her.

She laid her hand on Pete's shoulder and her voice was low and earnest. The words held the hard, practical wisdom of those first pioneer women who had walked with death on the western prairies. Pete Cordrey never forgot them.

"I have heard that my brother Jim is with the buffalo hunters on the Medicine Lodge," Kit said then. "If you should meet him say that I send my love."

Smoky Smith came down to Cleberg's corral in the hour before dawn to witness the departure. "Wish I could go along, kid," he said, "but there is some unfinished business to attend to here."

"I know," Pete said. He wore a cartridge belt and holster, and in the holster was Wick Hyde's bone-handled six-shooter.

"I bought you a Sharps, Pete," Smoky said. "Comanche will teach you to shoot."

"That I will," boomed the old man.

"Where's your skinner?" the marshal said.

"Oh, he's around," said Comanche.

Moving up to the wagon, Smoky heard a muffled snore under the tarp. "Is that him?"

"Yup. Best damn buffalo skinner in town."

"Who is it?"

"Ben Dancey. Shore will be surprised after he sleeps off his drunk."

"I believe you shanghaied him."

"Now, ye know I wouldn't do nothin' like that, Smoky."

"I wouldn't put anything past you."

Pete climbed to the wagon seat and gathered up the reins of the four-horse hitch. "'By, Smoky."

"Good luck, kid."

Comanche picked up the lead rope of the second of the two saddle horses and heaved into the saddle, heading out of the corral. The soft talk of the wagon wheels and the clip-clop of shod hoofs faded away in the gray dawn.

PETE CORDREY was first to see the great cloud, like dust rolling ahead of a squall; then his gaze settled on the vast, slow-moving river of shaggy animals. He stared, hardly able to believe his eyes.

"Buffalo!"

"Comin' this way," said Comanche Cooney, who seemed less interested in the herd than what might have started it up from the river bottoms.

Pete and Comanche left their horses and moved to high ground and the kid watched the plainsman set up his cross-sticks—the rest for the heavy Sharps.

"Won't they stampede when you shoot?" Pete said.

Comanche shook his head. "Not as

long as they kain't see or smell ye. Dumbest critters with hoofs."

The *wham* of the Sharps blasted through the silence. A big buffalo bull staggered and went down. The ones nearest paid no heed to the dead animal. "Best critters are allus at the front," said Comanche, ejecting the shell and reloading. "Old uns an' the cows an' calves travel mostly in the drags."

The gun roared again. The buffalo continued to graze as a third and a fourth animal dropped.

"Soak that rag an' ramrod it through the barrel," said Comanche. "Overheatin' spoiles a gun."

Pete was so excited his hands shook. "Ye'll git over it," said Cooney. "Ye sight just back of the fore laig, about a third of the way up the body." He began to shoot again. His marksmanship at two hundred yards was superb, and the .50 caliber slugs terrible in their destructive power.

Approaching the trap-rock rim where Comanche had made his stand, the leaders began a slow turn. Once when a buffalo fell another of the shaggy beasts stopped and began to sniff. Old Man Cooney quickly dropped the inquisitive one.

"Soon's one gits a good whiff of blood he'll start a-pawin' an' a-bellerin', an' it's good-by herd."

Close to fifty animals were down and still the buffalo were moving past. "All we kin skin out 'fore dark," said Comanche. "Fetch up the hosses, young un, an' we'll go git Ben."

From the time he had heaved to a sitting position in the jolting wagon box and cast his bleary eyes around, Ben Dancey had been full of lament. Old Man Cooney had reined alongside.

"I shore must 'a' been crazy drunk to git tangled up with an outfit like this," Ben Dancey had howled, glaring disgustedly first at the kid and then at Cooney.

"Ye wuz drunk all right, ye ole buz-

zard," said Comanche. "Let it be a lesson to ye."

The buffalo skinner, a long-shanked, dismal man, had constantly predicted that the redskins would skewer and scalp them before the expedition was out a week. "We're jist committin' suicide."

Pete Cordrey was too excited over his first big adventure on the great plains to be too much concerned with Ben Dancey's carping. There was work to be done—camp chores, tending the stock, helping with the skinning and curing the hides—and it left little time for fear to creep in.

Buffalo were plentiful though Comanche said the herds were not of a size that would be moving from the north later. Only the hides were taken now, but later when it was colder the hindquarters and the tongue, along with the hides, would be hauled to the hide-buyers' station at Little Fork.

Skinning was hard, dirty work; but Pete and Comanche helped out, for it meant more hides. There was work, too, in curing the hides, which were first dusted with poison against flies and insects. They were then staked out a day or two for the first cure; then turned. The final operation was to place them in piles, hair-side up.

At the end of the first month nearly nine hundred hides were piled up at the permanent camp, representing over two thousand five hundred dollars at railside.

Comanche told Pete that after the expenses of outfitting were taken out, the profits would be shared equally.

"I ain't earned a man's share," Pete protested.

"Ye kin argue that with Smoky Smith," growled Comanche.

"We'll never live to enjoy the damn money," gloomed Ben Dancey. "I been smellin' Injuns."

"Thar's wus than redskins on the plains," said Comanche, "an' that's hide-thieves."

During the weeks in the open Pete Cordrey endured a slow hardening process, like steel under fire. At first his unused muscles had screamed in protest and his softness had brought bodily torture; but he had never let on and was surprised how much rough going he could stand. The dry air of the high plains was like a tonic; his cough became less frequent, less racking.

The Sharps that Smoky Smith had bought Pete was a .45-110-400, a lighter gun than Old Man Cooney's, but a good buffalo killer nevertheless, and Pete's biggest thrill came the day he set his first cross-ticks and dropped a big bull at one hundred and fifty yards.

He also learned to handle a six-shooter fairly well; not good enough to stand up against a gun-fighter, he told himself, but with enough speed and accuracy to be a rough customer if his hand were forced.

CHAPTER THREE

Mule Creek Showdown

THE night meal was finished and Comanche and Ben Dancey were squatted by the fire when the three horsemen came up slowly into the soft ring of firelight. Pete, dog tired, was stretched at full length on his blankets.

"Evenin', gentlemen," said the spokesman. "Saw your fire." He was bearded,

heavy-set. "Name is Tresgus. I'm a hide buyer from Little Fork."

"How do," grunted Old Man Cooney, regarding the riders from under the brim of his hat.

"We're makin' a survey of the camps between the Medicine Lodge an' the Cimarron." His eye took in the dark shapes of the stacked hides. "You made an early start, I take it."

"Yup," said Comanche.

Pete Cordrey raised up on his elbow, studying the horsemen. Something about the tall rider beside Tresgus struck him as being familiar.

"Small outfit," said the bearded man, continuing to size up the camp.

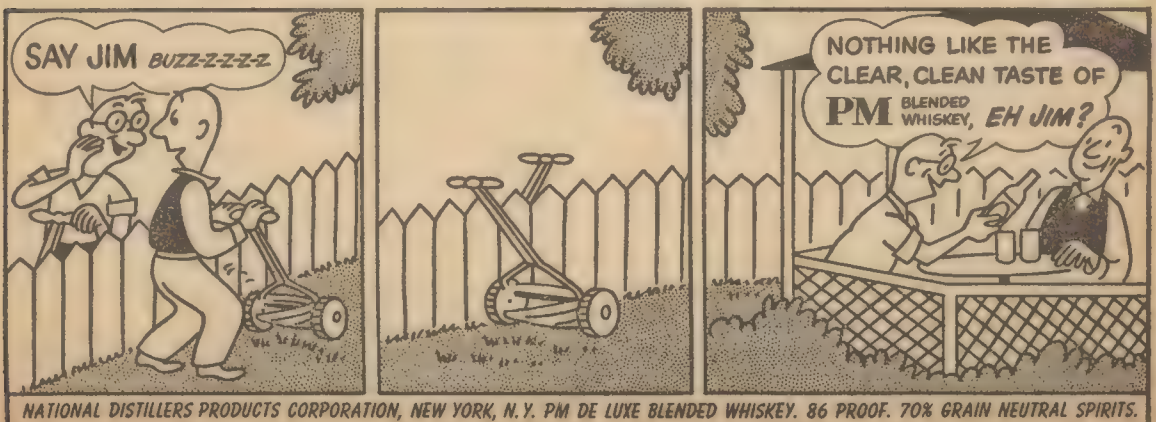
The tall rider said, "Redskins cleaned out a party of hide-hunters beyond the Medicine Lodge couple days ago. We buried the bodies."

Ben Dancey wagged his head, his long face glum. "Could 'a' been us just as well," he croaked.

"Tresgus?" said Old Man Cooney. "Thought I knowed all them hide buyers at Little Fork."

"Tubel Tresgus," said the bearded man. "Me an' my partners opened up a station this fall."

The old man in greasy buckskin was a sharp one, Pete thought; he wasn't fooled. These men were not hide buyers. Just a week ago a party of hide hunters had visited the camp, warning that hide



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thieves already had been raiding outfits.

Comanche said, "Light down. We'll rustle ye some grub."

"Don't mind company for the night, I reckon," said Tresgus.

Old Man Cooney made no answer to that but he said to Pete, "Take keer of their hosses, young un."

The riders dismounted. They removed gun-boots and bedrolls, and off-saddled. Pete led the horses away, a queer tightness at the pit of his stomach. Comanche, he thought, had some purpose in sending him to stake out the horses. He picketed the animals at the edge of the creek and walked slowly back to the wagon, a little removed from the camp cricle.

Ben Dancey had the coffeepot on and was frying buffalo steaks. The skinner was making most of the conversation, bragging of the success of the hunt and the number of hides taken. Comanche, still squatted on the ground, was watching the strangers, hunkered down across the fire.

The eyes of Tresgus were restive, shutting from Cooney to Dancey; then sliding toward his companions. Once he turned to glance at Pete, leaning against a wagon wheel. The tall man was named Johnson. Pete was sure that he had seen him somewhere.

Close to four thousand dollars' worth of hides was stacked beyond the wagon, waiting for the bull wains that would follow the buyers. They represented weeks of sweat and toil. There had been constant Indian threat, the danger of buffalo stampedes. Pete's heart pounded in his throat, his senses sharpened to little things now—lidded eyes watching, veiled glances, hands hovering close to holstered six-shooters.

The third member of the trio was half-facing Pete. He was younger than the others, in the early twenties. He was good-looking, with yellow hair and small regular features.

"These boys have done a nice job, eh, Pike?" said Tresgus.

"That they have," said the tall man.

Pete gave a little start. His mind whirled back to the night he had stopped in front of Dan Kelly's saloon, to the group standing there talking in low tones. One of them had been addressed as "Pike"—the tall man who had later disappeared in the darkness across the street from Tom Neeley's.

A tenseness gripped Pete Cordrey as Pike Johnson's glance came his way in hard scrutiny.

The thinking of Pike Johnson was a slow process that brought into focus the picture of a kid in a flop-brimmed hat, facing Wick Hyde there in the window light.

BEN DANCEY was moving by the fire. Comanche fumbled forth his twist of tobacco and chewed off a fresh cud. Pike Johnson eyed them for a moment; then sent his glance to the kid again. The plan had been to wait until the camp was asleep; then kill these buffalo hunters in their blankets, adding the hides they had taken to the loot taken at the hide-hunters' camp beyond the Medicine Lodge.

The kid was acting queer, hanging back there by the wagon. Pike Johnson caught the eye of Tubel Tresgus and, holding his right hand against his body, made a fist; then moved the forefinger like a man pulling a trigger. Tresgus had felt that Comanche Cooney was suspicious, and he answered with a tight nod.

The yellow-haired youth was watching and he caught the signal.

The talk had run out and there came a flat lull. Ben Dancey seemed to sense that something was in the air and his glance went across the fire toward the three strangers. He straightened his lank frame slowly, the sizzling skillet held in his bony hand.

"Jist about ready fer ye to lay to, gents," Dancey said.

Pike Johnson had been with Wick Hyde that night at the start of the thing, Pete reflected, but he had pulled out with the man called McAndrew, one of the Trail City toughs.

Pete Cordrey's nerves were wound up tight as he thought about those raided hide-hunters' camps. He set his back against the wagon wheel rim and let his hand drift toward his gun-belt. Those last words of Kit Allison whispered to him out of the vast silence of the starry night. The time had come to put them into effect.

Pike Johnson started a casual movement of his hand that seemed innocent enough; yet was the beginning of a sneak draw that was never finished, for he was a dead man before his six-shooter cleared the low holster.

Hot flame struck furiously from the direction of the wagon and the slug from Pete Cordrey's gun pitched him forward. Tubel Tresgus jerked to a half crouch, his gun swinging upward with the movement of his body. Cooney swept his Colt from the holster with a minimum of movement, firing from a point level with his knees while still lumped on his heels.

The brief threshing of Pike Johnson's legs close beside him threw Tubel Tresgus a fraction off stride and his bullet missed the buckskin man, while the sledging blow of Comanche's missile brought the outlaw down in a sprawl at the fire's white ash edge.

The yellow-haired youth clawed out his six-shooter, dropping his left knee to the ground to steady the draw. Ben Dancey promptly back-handed the hot skillet and its sizzling contents into the other's face. Cooney lurched erect and cracked his gun-barrel down hard, dropping the youth onto his face.

Dancey rescued the skillet. "Shore as hell cheated theirselfs out of a good meal."

Cooney regarded Pete Cordrey with approval. "Purty quick on the trigger, young un."

"I was watching him," Pete said. "A feller named Pike Johnson was with Wick Hyde when they started up the street from the Alamo to go after Smoky Smith."

"If we had been a big outfit," Comanche opined, "reckon they'd laid back an' warped it to us arter we crawled in."

"Our luck kain't hold," grumped Dancey. "We're just playin' hookey from hell. You mark my word."

"Shet up yore bellyachin', ye ole bag of bones," said Comanche.

The yellow-haired youth stirred, groaning, and pushed himself to a sitting position. His face smeared with blood, he stared at the prostrate figures of his companions and then looked at the others.

"Ye been runnin' in bad company, young feller," said Comanche.

The yellow-haired youth cursed him.

Pete Cordrey said, "What's your name?" That look around those blue eyes reminded him of somebody.

"My name is nothin' to you."

"Be a pity not to mark the grave," said Comanche.

"What grave?"

"Ain't no law west of Trail City," Old Man Cooney said; "not much thar. Ye been runnin' with worse killers than redskins. Me an' my pards wouldn't be doin' our duty if we turnt ye loose to go on like ye been doin'."

"You mean—"

Comanche nodded. "Git the shovel," he told Pete. "We got buryin' to do."

It was Pete Cordrey's first experience with plains' law, with this sort of retribution that was meted out in this raw land. Back in Market Square he had heard tales of these brief tribunals at graves' end, but now he was close to it.

Beyond the camp three shallow graves were scooped out by Comanche and Ben

Dancey. Pete stayed to watch the prisoner, who sat with his head buried in his hands.

"You got any folks?" Pete said.

The yellow head nodded at him. "A sister."

Pete frowned. Suddenly he remembered the talk of Kit Allison's no-good brother. That last night in Trail City the girl had said wistfully, "*Perhaps you will meet Jim out there.*"

Pete understood the resemblance that had puzzled him then, and he said suddenly, "You're Jim Allison!"

Comanche came and took his Sharps from the wagon.

The youth had thrown his head back and was staring at Pete.

"I never heard of him," he said.

"I know your sister," Pete said. "You look like her."

Cooney moved on past the fire, hearing what Pete had said. He glared at the young outlaw, oaths rumbling out of him. "Why, ye low-down cuss." He stopped, shook his head. "'Low everybody on Trail Street knows that little gal."

Ben Dancey joined them, looking from one to the other, seeing that something was up.

"What's goin' on?"

"Never mind, ye lally-gaggin' ole wind-bag," said Cooney.

"Don't tell her about this," Jim Allison pleaded. "Don't let on that you ever saw me."

Comanche Cooney was hard, a man now grown fierce and uncompromising through riding with Old Man Death on these high plains, but there was softness in him now. He flung out unexpectedly, "Saddle yore hoss an' git!"

A sob choked out of Jim Allison. "I'm done ridin' outlaw after this."

"Mebbe so," said Comanche. "Mebbe so."

"She said to say she sent her love," Pete said, "if we saw you."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun Trial at Hell's Corner

IT WAS late October when the buyers' wagons, the heavy bull wains from Little Fork, arrived at Mule Creek to pick up the hides. Immediately Comanche Cooney and his partners prepared to return to Trail City for supplies.

The big hunt was on and they saw many outfits, which led Comanche to remark that not again during the season would it be possible to work from a permanent camp.

Camp followers, moving out from Trail City, were doing a lucrative business with their whiskey wagons; and Ben Dancey and Comanche sampled various "tailored" brands, which were nothing more than raw alcohol colored with coffee.

With millions of buffalo on the plains and hundreds of hide-hunters engaged in the kill, it meant the development of a business of staggering proportions, with many opportunities for profit by all manner of sharpers. Pete Cordrey heard Rance Varell's name mentioned at a number of camps as the man who had financed some of the larger outfits.

The news from Trail City was that Smoky Smith was having a hard time keeping the roughs in line, and that Tom Moody, the mayor, was certain to stand or fall with this gun-fighting marshal.

The distant whistle of a locomotive and a plume of smoke across a rise were the first indications of civilization. Then there was a brown sprawl of buildings at the end of the yellow thread that was the winding wagon trail, and the wheel ruts at last merged with the dust of lower Trail Street.

Pete Cordrey, since turning his face west from this town, had grown in fiber and toughness and wisdom. He looked at Trail City through a man's eyes now, seeing it as a place of sudden death.

Before turning in at Cleberg's corral he sat in the saddle for a little, watching up Trail Street in the hope that he might see Smoky Smith somewhere. Didn't seem like he could wait to tell Smoky about the hunt and all the hides they'd taken.

Ben Dancey swung the team into the big corral and climbed from the wagon seat, looping the reins over the hames, to stand looking thirstily in the direction of Dan Kelly's saloon. He slid a glance in the direction of Comanche Cooney as he moved toward the street.

"I'm powerful dry," said Ben Dancey. "Just am a-goin' to git one snort over to the Alamo an' I'll be back to help unhitch."

"I found ye in a saloon, ye whiskey-sluggin' ole badger," croaked Cooney, "an' ye'll likely die in one." He waved the skinner on.

"Jist one," said Ben Dancey, his eyes gleaming, "to lay the dust."

TRAIL CITY had already started its spending orgy. The talk was that before the season was done the buffalo hunters would have taken better than two million dollars. Most of it was going to be spent in this town which the coming of the railroad had made the hide capital.

Already saloons, gambling halls and honky-tonks were grabbing their share and more. Guns blazed, and through their greed and lust and hatred men died.

Trail herds, flowing out of Texas, added their share of tough customers and the Trail City police force, under Smoky Smith, was the difference between some show of sanity and utter lawlessness.

The area south of the tracks swarmed with thieves and killers. Rance Varell, in white linen and broadcloth, smooth as silk and hard as a gunbarrel, had under his hand a small army of gun artists, their boot-lickers and their henchmen.

Close around him the satrap of "Little Hell" kept a select few as lieutenants and a bodyguard. These included Wick Hyde, Frank Goren, Al Orr, Lee McAndow and Chilly Johnson, a brother of Pike Johnson, who was buried in a shallow grave out on Mule Creek.

Rance Varell only awaited the return of Pike Johnson and Tubel Tregus before setting in motion the plot to smash Smoky Smith, beat him into the dust under a fusillade of gunfire.

Varell and Wick Hyde, the dapper little gunslick, had brought up the subject today in Dan Kelly's Alamo saloon, their voices at a low pitch, and they gave no more than a passing glance at the long-shanked, horse-faced man who came in and pushed up to the bar.

"Howdy, Dancey," said Dan Kelly with a grin. "Long time no see."

"Been killin' buffalo," said Ben Dancey.

"Seems like I remember you hired out to Comanche Cooney," Dan Kelly said, winking at one of his bartenders.

"You remember more'n I do," Dancey said. "I know I was in here drinkin' an' I don't recollect no more until I woke up in a wagon."

Dan Kelly set out a glass and bottle. "Big kill?"

"Big fer a one-hoss outfit like Cooney's." Ben Dancey poured a brimming glass of whiskey.

"I hear Indians have been raidin' hide-hunter camps on Medicine Lodge," said Wick Hyde, giving Varell a knowing side glance.

"Redskins, hell!" snorted Dancey. "It's whites. They mess up the hunters to make it look like Injuns."

Varell's eyebrows lifted. He knew the sort of game Pike Johnson and Tubel Tregus were playing.

"Some hombres come into camp one night," said Dancey, "claimin' they was hide buyers." He gulped his whiskey

down. "Feller named Tresgus done the talkin'. Figgered he was a damn camp jumper an' we shot his eyeballs out."

Rance Varell turned slowly, driving a hard look at Ben Dancey. "You say you killed Tresgus?" His voice was soft.

A buffalo skinner was low caste and lived and died without glory. Ben Dancey had only wielded a hot skillet that night on Mule Creek, but he felt that here was a chance to adorn himself with a hero's crown. "We finished off Tresgus," he boasted, "an' a feller named Pike Johnson."

Varell pulled a six-shooter quickly from under his coat and, as Ben Dancey's eyes suddenly grew big, shot him in the belly.

Big Dan Kelly stared at Varell and shook his head. "You shouldn't 'a' done it, Rance; it's goin' to get me in wrong with Smoky Smith."

"Don't worry," Varell said, "everything will be taken care of."

THIS shot that exploded in Dan Kelly's saloon carried the length of Trail Street and on to the Babylon beyond the Santa Fe steel. It reached eventually to Market Square in Kansas City, as the story was told and retold of the world that crashed down that day on the high plains.

The sound of the shot stopped all movement on sidewalk and gallery. Other than that it came from the lower end of Trail Street, no one was certain at first of its source. The breathless moment of quiet was followed by a ripple of voices, by men asking, "Where did it come from?"

Someone said, "It was in the Alamo."

It went along the street. "Hell's Corner!"

Frank Goren came up across the Dead Line to stand at the corner of Railroad Street. Not half an hour ago Varell and Wick Hyde had left the group in a saloon South of the Track with the announce-

ment that they were going to the Alamo.

Goren watched Smoky Smith leave the man with whom he had been talking, on down the block, and start slowly toward the Alamo. Goren swung back toward the track and, seeing Al Orr and Chilly Johnson, motioned to them with a sweep of his arm.

A week ago young Jim Allison had come to Trail City to see his sister, to tell her that he was done with the outlaw game. He was in Tom Neeley's now and he saw that Kit was deeply troubled by the shot.

"You in love with this Smoky Smith, sis?" Jim said.

"I love the two of you," the girl said, "and you have kept me worried sick with your crazy playing on thin ice."

Old Man Cooney, swearing like a trooper because Ben Dancey had gone off when there was work to be done, stopped what he was doing and turned to look across in the direction of the Alamo.

Pete Cordrey went to stand by the corral's entrance, watching the street.

The slow rap of Smoky Smith's boot-heels on the plank walk was a distinct sound against the silence. Coming to the end of the gallery near the saddle shop, he started obliquely across Trail Street toward the Alamo. Somebody had touched off a shot in Dan Kelly's place and he wanted to know about it.

Tom Moody came out of his office, on past Tom Neeley's, to stand watching down the street.

In the Alamo, Rance Varell stood close against the wall, just inside of the batwing doors. Here he could observe a sector of the lower street without being seen. Wick Hyde was at the adjoining window, looking over the checkered glass set in the lower sash, a six-shooter in his hand.

Big Dan Kelly, behind the bar, was saying in a high whine, "You're goin' to get me in a fix, Rance!"

"Shut up, you soft-bellied swine!" Varell said without turning his head.

Dan Kelly leaned across the bar for a look at Ben Dancey. He was dead. The few occupants began a movement toward the back.

Pete Cordrey moved out from the corral head-frame. He couldn't see anything wrong at the saloon—nobody coming out, no sounds of a fight. Just that graveyard quiet. He wondered what was keeping Ben Dancey.

Smoky Smith did not take his eyes from the Alamo, still slowly walking toward it.

It seemed to the kid that the marshal staggered before the sound of the shot came across to him. Smoky Smith came to a full stop, his hand dropping toward his holster but not able to find it.

A gun blasted again and the marshal rocked from the bullet's impact.

The shots tore the silence apart, opening the gates for a sudden loud gush of sounds—pounding feet, banging doors. Somewhere a voice bawled, "Hell's Corner!"

Pete Cordrey started forward, his hand dropping to the bone-handled six-shooter at his hip. Comanche Cooney's shout stopped him. "Git back here!"

Wick Hyde's eyes jerked from Smoky Smith, hard hit and swaying, to the gaunt figure in the black, flat-crowned hat, coming out from Cleberg's corral. He cursed savagely. "It's that damned kid!" His thoughts ripped back to the night in front of Tom Neeley's. "*I ain't never had no gun-learnin'.*"

"You'll get gun-learnin', you little son!" Wick Hyde dropped to one knee, poking a hole in the checkered pane and sliding his six-shooter barrel across the sash for a rest.

Pete Cordrey had turned at the rush of the bullet and the hammer-blow against the post of the head-frame. He dodged inside the stockade.

"They're in the Alamo," said Cooney,

unruffled. He started rummaging in the wagon box.

JACK RIVERS, of the Trail City police force, had come out of the Pilgrim Hotel, around the corner of Second Avenue, holstered up, and wanted to eat before he took over his night patrol. He started down Trail Street, his pace quickening when that first shot was followed now by the slam of guns in the direction of lower Trail Street.

Smoky Smith was down on one knee; his hand still groping for his six-shooter. Jack Rivers, pulling his gun, called to a group on a gallery. "Where are they?"

"Bushed up in the Alamo," someone answered him.

Rivers had not seen Frank Goren and Al Orr coming up Railroad Street from the Dead Line to the Trail Street corner, when he started down from Second Avenue. But he saw them now, saw that their guns were drawn.

Billy Camp, deputy marshal, had been getting shaved in the barber shop up the street beyond Beal's store and at the sound of the first shot he left the chair and went to the door with lather on his face and the apron still draped across his front.

The swift run of events now outpaced his methodical thinking and he pulled the apron off slowly, turning back into the shop to lift his gunbelt from the wall hook under his hat.

The shots down the street prodded Billy Camp to greater haste. He slapped the gunbelt around his middle, took a wipe at his lathered face and moved in lengthening stride toward Railroad Street.

There was the sudden hard concussion of guns across Trail Street. He saw Jack Rivers then, one arm hooked around a gallery post, slowly sagging to the planking, his gun loose in his hand.

Billy Camp's glance raced to the corner and found Frank Goren and Al Orr, hold-

ing leveled six-shooters. He thought vaguely, "Guess I ain't goin' to need a shave." Funny how a man's mind ran. The crash of guns roared through his head and blackness closed down.

McAndrew, Chilly Johnson and other of the Varell cohorts were moving up Railroad Street on the run. Mayor Tom Moody whirled back into his office and reappeared a moment later with a sawed-off shotgun.

A bearded man called out, "Election is bein' held a little early this fall, ain't it, Moody?"

"Yes," said Tom Moody, grim-toned, "an' they're usin' lead ballots."

The shot that killed Ben Dancey in the Alamo had set off an almost leisurely-paced pattern of movement that was culminated by Varell's downing of Smoky Smith.

The shooting down of Rivers and Camp, which followed, left the town stunned by this unexpected outbreak of violence. Almost in a twinkling, Trail City had been swept by a revolt that had smashed its police force, leaving the town helpless under the guns of the toughs.

Goren and Orr tramped along the sidewalk toward the Alamo in swaggering insolence, waving their guns. McAndrew and Chilly Johnson and those with them clotted for a moment at the Railroad Street corner, six-shooters in their hands, suddenly bold and loud.

Kit Allison came out to the gallery in front of Tom Neeley's place with her brother, saw that Smoky Smith was hard hit, and her hands clenched.

Jim Allison saw how it was, saw that the marshal was completely at the mercy of this wolf pack. His face suddenly had that old look of outlaw hardness.

"This is my kind of a game." He started down the street in a long stride.

Pete Cordrey and Comanche Cooney had come out of the corral with their buffalo guns to stand by the cluster of

freight wagons. Pete said suddenly, "There's Jim Allison!"

"Never figgered on seein' that young hellion ag'in," growled Cooney.

A dozen feet from the spot where Smoky Smith was down, Jim Allison stopped, swept his six-gun from its holster and turned it loose on the toughs strung out on the sidewalk. A roar of gunfire answered him.

This tempest of sound was joined by the slam of the Sharps, thunderclaps that sent missiles screaming into the ranks of Varell's men. Comanche's .50 caliber gun carried away a piece of a gallery post, hit Al Orr in the chest and jackknifed him forward. Pete Cordrey's .45-110-400 put a slug into Frank Goren that brought him crashing down.

The hidden guns in the Alamo had also turned on the yellow-haired youth, and he wavered, took an uncertain step or two and dropped into the dust.

A bullet from the broken pane in the saloon ripped past Pete Cordrey then and splattered against a steel wheel rim. Another slapped at Cooney's buckskin jacket and laid a red crease along his ribs.

Comanche roared, "Dose them varmints in the Alamo!"

Pete Cordrey poked a fresh cartridge into the breech of the Sharps, his rummaging eye on the saloon at Hell's Corner. He found the broken pane and saw the jerking gun-barrel there and lined his sights on it. Then came the hard thunder-clap of the buffalo gun.

Dan Kelly's screaming, "You've fixed it all right!" seemed far away to Varell as he looked and saw Wick Hyde kicking on the floor, the side of his head blown off. He had backed away a step or two when Cooney began battering slugs through the front boarding of the Alamo.

A bullet furrowed the bar, inches from Dan Kelly. Another exploded the back-bar glassware. The third caught Varell and drove through him.

Sight of the pair with Sharps rifles by the freight wagons brought a howl of dismay from McAndow. Six-shooters were playthings against buffalo guns at this range. He had turned back toward the Railroad Street corner when a bullet from Pete Cordrey's rifle sledged into him, sending him crashing against a wall.

Chilly Johnson, back up the sidewalk, was plunging for a doorway in wild panic, but he was stopped by a charge of buck-shot from Tom Moody's shotgun. The others threw away their guns and flung their arms high into the air.

All movement stopped then, and there was stillness, the stillness that had belonged to the solitude of the high plains before Trail City sprang booming from the tough prairie sod.

Trail Street drew a long breath; then hushed, awed voices began to run along it like freshening wind in a sea of grass.

Kit Allison came down the sidewalk with a swish of calico, her face pale, taut.

Jim Allison was dead, riddled with bullets. The tall marshal was alive but breathing gustily, like a man whose race is close to being run. "He must live!" the girl said through tight lips.

Some claimed it was the doc who pulled Smoky Smith through; some said it was Kit Allison, quitting at Tom Neeley's to nurse him.

Kit's sorrow at losing her brother was tempered by the knowledge that he had

made full reparation for the deeds charged against him. She often wondered what had brought him back to Trail City and possible arrest, what had so changed him, for he had never told her, nor did Pete Cordrey or Comanche Cooney.

When Smoky Smith was up and around he told Pete and Comanche Cooney that he was done as marshal and was going to turn buffalo hunter. "It's less wear and tear on a man. And—well, one of these days Kit and I are going to be married."

Cooney snorted. "Buffalo hunters ain't got no business bein' tied to apron-strings!"

"These are a different sort of apron-strings, Comanche," Pete Cordrey said soberly.

"They are, aren't they, Boots?" Smoky said. "It was Kit, with a woman's understanding, that told Boots to keep that bone-handled Colt of Wick Hyde's, and to learn to use it."

"She told me somethin' else," Pete said, "just before we left on the buffalo hunt. That was how I come to put a bullet into the feller named Pike Johnson so quick that night on Mule Crick. First, I just figgered to get the drop on him; then I remembered what Kit said."

"What did this female tell ye, young un?" said Cooney.

"Never to pull a gun unless I was goin' to shoot," Pete said, "an' then to shoot to kill."

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JIM IS A NEW MAN WITH HIS HEARING AID

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AND TO THINK-I ALMOST MISSED THIS PROMOTION BECAUSE OF POOR HEARING

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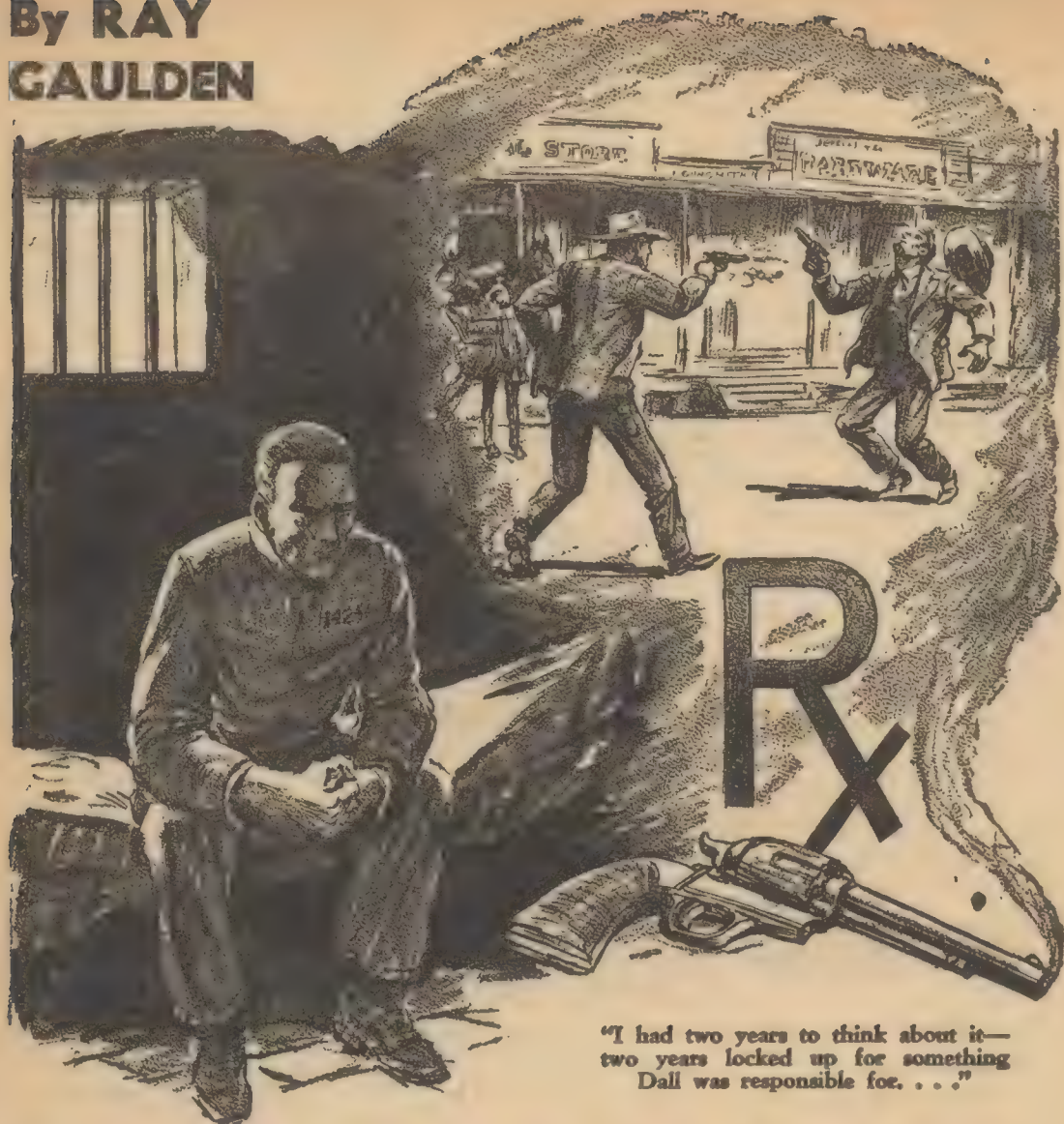
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GAULDEN



"I had two years to think about it—
two years locked up for something
Dall was responsible for. . . ."

DEATH DEAL

THE six-horse team kicked up the raw, sienna-colored dust as the Butterfield stage came swaying into the little town of San Isabel. Brent Allison, the lone passenger, sat on the edge of the canvas-covered seat and looked at the fa-

miliar landmarks flashing past. Sight of the old sandstone courthouse, where he had stood before the stern-faced judge and listened to him pass sentence, caused Allison's gray eyes to turn frosty, as though an icy wind had swept across them.

Only one thing could have brought Doc Allison back from hell—a fighting chance to put another man back there!

The stage coach pulled up in front of the Goodnight Hotel and Allison climbed out, stretching his long legs and brushing dust from the cheap suit they had given him along with the handshake and the few words of advice.

He stood on the plank walk, his brooding eyes passing over the buildings lining the wide, wheel-slashed street. He noticed that Kessler's general store had been painted recently. Other than that, everything appeared pretty much as he remembered it. There were no new buildings, but the old ones still had that look of permanence. Two years hadn't made much difference in the town. But he knew that two years had changed him, as prison changes most men.

Starting down the street, Allison saw Jeek Minger, the gunsmith, step out of his shop. Jeek hadn't changed either. The little gunsmith was past sixty, but he didn't look it. His hair hadn't started to thin and he still had most of his teeth. Jeek was proud of his hair and he wore it long, almost down to his shoulders. Heading up-town now he glanced across the street, and when his eyes fell on Brent Allison he veered sharply and came running across the strip of brownish-yellow dust, a broad smile lighting his leathery face.

"Doc! You son-of-a-gun! Is it really you?"

The name caused something to tighten inside Allison, but he gave the gunsmith a twisted smile. "It's me, all right, Jeek. Or maybe I should say what's left of me."

Jeek Minger sobered, a frown drawing his shaggy eyebrows together. "Now what kind of talk is that? You don't look so bad, a little thinner, maybe, but you'll pick up as soon as you start eating some good grub again. Come on and let's have a drink."

They walked down a few doors and into Hogan's place. There was a moose head with a wide spread of antlers on the wall

back of the bar, and under the moose head hung a picture of John L. Sullivan. There wasn't much of a crowd, just a few fellows sitting at some of the card tables—the same men playing cards and wearing the same faces. The only change he noticed was the sawdust on the floor. And there was a new bartender, a man Allison didn't know, but who seemed pleasant enough and didn't keep them waiting when they stepped up to the mahogany bar.

Jeek Minger lifted his drink and said, "Here's to your homecoming, doc."

There it was again. Doc. The name caused somber shadows to slide across his hollow eyes, and he said bitterly, "It isn't doc any more. They took my license away, remember?"

The gunsmith tasted his drink and then set it back on the bar. He looked at Allison, his eyes searching the man's thin, sallow face. "It may take a little time," Jeek Minger said, "but you'll have your shingle out again."

Allison was gripping his whiskey glass hard and his lips were tight and slanted. "I'm not staying, Jeek," he said harshly. "I came back here for just one reason."

Jeek looked a little worried now. He stared at Allison steadily. "Brent, you haven't got some crazy idea in your head about killing Herbert Dall?"

Allison's eyes were closed down, his face cold and implacable. "I've had two years to think about it," he said. "Two years locked up in a stinking hole for something Dall was responsible for."

Jeek picked up his glass and then set it back on the bar. The worry in his eyes had deepened. He said, "Damn it, Brent, you've got to forget about that. I know it's not easy, but you've got a future to think about."

The little gunsmith's words had no effect on Allison; his mind was made up. He had thought about it too long to back down now. He said darkly, "I don't care

what happens to me after I settle with Dall. I'm washed up as a doctor, so it doesn't make any difference."

"You're not washed up, Brent. You're—"

"You could talk all day," Allison said roughly, "and you still couldn't make me see it any other way. Finish your drink and let's get out of here. I want the best gun you've got in your shop, and you might as well give it to me. If you don't, I'll get one somewhere else."

His shoulders sagging, Jeek Minger sighed heavily. "All right, Brent. It's your life that you're fixing to wreck, but I hate to see you do it. Your folks were the best friends I ever had, and you and me have always been pretty close. Come on. Let's go."

Jeek Minger had come to San Isabel twenty-five years before and opened his shop. He did good work and Allison knew that folks came from miles around to have their guns repaired. It was a neat little place, with Jeek's work bench against the back wall. There was a small glass showcase filled with many different model guns—an old cap and ball, a Patterson five shot, a Remington .36, and a big Navy Colt.

Standing in front of the showcase, Allison stared moodily at one of the revolvers. Jeek Minger studied him for a moment and finally he said, "Your medical instruments are still here."

Allison did not look up.

"I won't be needing them any more," he said.

Jeek moistened his lips and his eyes were troubled. "Brent, I've been looking forward to your coming back. I figured you and Helen would get married now. I thought—"

He paused, looking speculatively at the other man.

"Quit doing so much thinking," Allison said, "and get me the gun."

WHEN he left the shop, he had a Colt .45 strapped about his waist. He had never worn a gun before and he did not like the feel of it. Folks stared at him as he walked down the street and he guessed they knew what was in his mind. He wondered if some of them weren't thinking, *You're supposed to save lives, not take them.* But they couldn't know how it was. They had stayed here in this town and lived like people were meant to live, while he had been locked up behind those high walls.

Reaching the red brick bank building, Allison's lips flattened with bitterness as he looked at the sign that said Herbert Dall, M. D. Below the name was an arrow pointing toward the stairs at the side of the building. Allison climbed the stairs and reaching the landing, he paused a moment, looking beyond the town, his eyes straying across blue distance to the pine-dotted mountains in the west. He had been born up there in the shadow of those mountains, and at first he had wanted to be a cowman, but his father changed his mind. Both his parents had wanted him to be a doctor.

Brent Allison had studied hard, night and day, and he remembered the proud light in his mother's eyes when he came back to San Isabel, and opened his office. His parents had died three years ago. He missed them, but he was glad they weren't here to see him now.

Allison found the office door open and he went in, his eyes searching the untidy room. There was no sign of Dall, but an old man was sweeping the place out. He had his back to the door and he turned around slowly, his faded eyes peering at Allison. "Well for gosh sakes! If it ain't Doc Allison."

Disappointment was running through Allison at not finding Dall. He said, "How are you, Andy?"

Andy Clovis was an old-time bronc

buster who drank a little too much, but everybody liked him and gave him all the odd jobs they could. He'd had a bad leg, the result of his bronc riding days; and Allison had operated, repairing the injury so that Andy could walk as well as ever.

"I can't complain, Doc," Andy said. "Leg never gives me a bit of trouble."

Allison ran his eyes over Dall's cluttered desk, impatience working in him. Facing Andy Clovis again, he asked, "Any idea where Dall is?"

His face sour, the old man nodded. "Went out to the Skillet ranch. The ramrod broke his arm, but I don't know why they sent for Dall. I figure almost anybody could do as good a job as that quack."

A dim smile pulled at Allison's lips. "Andy, you're talking about the man you're working for."

The handyman spat tobacco juice into the brass cuspidor and then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He said, "I reckon he knows how most folks feel about him. He wouldn't have a patient once a month if he wasn't the only sawbones around here."

Allison turned toward the door, deciding he was too restless to wait. He said, "Don't work too hard, Andy."

Clovis came to the door and leaned on his broom, watching Allison descend the stairs. "Sure good to see you again, doc," he said.

Allison walked down the street and ran into Helen Langford coming out of Kessler's general store, a basket of groceries on her arm. She was a tall girl who moved with an easy grace. She wasn't really beautiful, but her eyes were clear and there was warmth and sincerity in them. Her brown eyes went wide at sight of him and for a moment he thought she was going to drop the basket. He reached for it quickly.

She said, "Brent. I wasn't looking for you until tomorrow."

It bothered him the way her eyes were

moving over his face, and he did not look at her directly. He said, "They released me a day early." Then he brought his eyes back to hers. "You're looking well, Helen."

She was studying him, wondering, he knew, how much he had changed; wondering what two years in prison had done to him. He guessed she wouldn't have to do much looking, for he knew the story was written plainly on his face.

They walked toward her mother's boarding house on the edge of town and Allison found himself staring down the trail that twisted like a piece of old yellow ribbon across the flats toward the hills, and he wondered how long before Dall would be coming back.

"You weren't much of a hand to write, Brent," Helen said.

"I never was, Helen, but those letters of yours helped a lot."

They reached the two-story house and stopped at the gate. "Won't you come in?" Helen asked. "Mother is out staying with Mrs. Lynn. She's expecting another child."

Allison's face smoothed out a little. "This will make her seventh, won't it?"

Helen nodded. She looked as if she had a lot of things on her mind, but didn't know how to say them. He wondered why Helen didn't forget about him; why she didn't find somebody else she could be happy with. She had never said she loved him, but he had seen it in her eyes sometimes when she looked at him. He wondered why she kept waiting, kept hoping, when deep inside she must have known that nothing could ever come of it.

He had nothing to give another woman, he told himself, for his heart was buried with Cora in the little cemetery up there on the hill. There had never been anybody except Cora. They had gone to school together and married when they were very young. They knew a few years

of happiness and then Cora died with the baby she tried to bring into the world. For two weeks, Allison had drunk heavily, trying to dull the ache. He was drunk the night Herbert Dall came to his office, looking frightened and saying he needed help. It was late, and Allison was in bad shape, but he went with Dall to the hotel. The clerk was asleep and nobody saw them go upstairs.

A man was lying on a bed in one of the rooms, a stranger who had just drifted into town that afternoon. Dall had operated and it was the worst piece of surgery Allison had ever seen. He did what he could, but the man had already lost too much blood. Dall slipped out of the room and it was Allison the clerk found when he came upstairs a few minutes later. Dall swore he knew nothing about the case. He said Allison had no business trying to perform an operation while he was drunk. And Dall had friends in the right places.

THE sound of Helen's voice brought Allison back to the present. "Brent, you're wearing a gun, and that can mean only one thing. You're planning to kill Herbert Dall."

Allison said quietly, "I'm going to try."

She came close to him and put her hands on the lapels of his coat. Her eyes were pleading with him. "I know it was awful, Brent, but you've got to tear that page from your life. At least you must try. You have a future to think about. You're a good doctor. You're still young."

His face looked pinched and bloodless. He put his hands on her shoulders and shook her. "Stop it, Helen," he said hoarsely. "Stop it."

She stared at him, recoiling a little from the hate that was naked and hot in his eyes. Finally she said, "All right, Brent. I guess your mind is made up. I guess nothing I can say will change it. I love you, Brent, but you know that. I'll go

away with you if you say the word. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make you happy, but if you go through with this, there will never be anything for us. If Dall doesn't kill you, you'll go back to prison, and this time you'll stay there for the rest of your life."

He took his hands from her shoulders, finding it hard to look at her, but his face was stern and unyielding. "I'm sorry, Helen," he said heavily, "but I guess the bitterness has eaten too deep. I can't explain it, but it's something I have to do."

She stood there, leaning against the white picket fence, her face colorless and her eyes wide with sorrow as she watched him walk stiffly back up the street.

Allison did not look back. He was in a black mood. He wished he hadn't seen Helen; he wished he had hidden out somewhere until Dall returned to town. All the talk in the world wasn't going to change his mind, but seeing Helen didn't make the job any easier.

Passing the sheriff's office, he looked through the open doorway, but saw no sign of anybody. A man leaning against the front of the adobe building said, "Sheriff's gone over to the county seat, but he'll be back this evening."

Allison kept walking. He felt the need of a drink and he turned into Hogan's place. The bartender poured whiskey into a glass and lingered to wipe at the polished bar. He had a pleasant face, but his eyes reflected pain. Allison studied the man over his drink. He said, "You don't look like you feel too good, friend."

The bartender looked at him quickly. "What gave you that idea?"

Allison smiled thinly. "I used to be a doctor."

The barman's face turned sour. "I don't have much faith in doctors," he said bitterly. "Been going to one in town and all he has done is give me some pink pills that haven't helped a bit."

Allison tasted his drink and set it back on the bar. "Where does it hurt?" he asked.

"In my stomach—mostly my right side."

Allison frowned, and in this case, he didn't stop to think about ethics. "You better see another doctor," he said. "You might have a bad appendix."

"I've wondered about that," the bartender said. "But it's a hundred miles to the next town where there's a doctor."

The swinging doors flew open then and Andy Clovis came in, his run-over boots pounding the floor as he hurried toward the bar. Reaching Allison, he said excitedly, "Doc, Dall just drove into town. He's down at the livery barn putting up his buggy."

Allison felt himself go rigid. He had the whiskey glass in his hand and he set it down carefully on the bar. "Tell him I'm back, Andy," he said. "Tell him to get a gun because I'm coming after him."

There wasn't a sound in the room and Allison knew that everybody was watching him. The bartender seemed to have stopped breathing, and the men at the card tables, he thought, looked as if they might be posing for a picture. Andy Clovis swallowed hard, shrinking a little from the savage flame in Allison's eyes. Then the handyman turned and was darting out the doors.

Allison laid a coin on the bar and left the room, his hand brushing the butt of his gun. A voice in his head was whispering to him, *This is it, Brent. This is what you've been waiting for. Get it over with in a hurry and to hell with what happens afterwards.*

Stepping onto the porch, he stood there, his eyes probing the street. There was no breeze to stir the dust and the setting sun splashed redly on the fronts of the buildings. He saw that they were getting the stagecoach ready for the evening run. The driver was lifting a large wooden crate

into the rear boot and seemed to be having a little trouble with it.

Allison's eyes went on along the street, finally coming to rest on the livery stable. He saw a man come through the big double doors carrying a little black satchel, and Allison's lips flattened into a thin, taut line across his white face. Herbert Dall, he thought, hadn't changed much. He still carried his head high and had that smug look about him.

Dall paused, frowning as he watched Andy Clovis come hurrying toward him. The handyman spoke swiftly and Dall stood there uncertainly for a moment. Then he turned and went quickly back into the barn. Allison wondered if the man had some idea of slipping out the back door, but evidently Dall had decided to stay and face him, for he reappeared presently and he wasn't carrying the black bag now. He'd gotten a gun, probably from the livery man, and had it strapped about his waist. He started down the street and Brent Allison moved to meet him.

People got off the walks in a hurry and suddenly it seemed quieter than Allison had ever known it to be. All he could hear was the ringing of the blacksmith's hammer, and then even that sound stopped and Allison had a glimpse of the big Swede in his leather apron, standing tensely in the doorway of the smithy.

Allison kept walking and he could see the faces of the townsfolk pressed close to the windows along the street—the white, strained faces of people he knew—folks he had once doctored. A man stepped out onto the porch of the feed store and his voice sounded loud in the tense silence.

"Damn it, doc. Don't go through with this. Most folks around here know you weren't guilty and they want you back. We need you here, doc."

Allison kept moving, not answering the man, not even looking at him. He passed

the building next to the barber shop and he remembered the day he opened his office there, young, ambitious, and full of dreams. The building was vacant now and he had the fleeting thought that maybe it wasn't too late; maybe he could start over. Like the man had said, most folks didn't blame him for what happened that night.

THE distance between them had narrowed now and he could see Dall's face. It was shiny with sweat and there were lines of strain about his mouth.

On Allison's left was Jeek Minger's little shop, but Allison saw no sign of the gunsmith. He wasn't standing in the doorway and he wasn't watching from a window. Then a gun went off somewhere close by, sounding loud and harsh in the heavy silence that lay over the town. No bullet came close to Dall, but he jumped, and Allison knew his nerves were raw.

Allison heard the swift clump of boots and saw a man go running into Jeek Minger's shop. Allison paused, a vague sense of uneasiness pulling at him. The townsman came back to the doorway, his face pale. "Jeek's been shot!" he yelled hoarsely. "He's bleeding all over the place!"

Brent Allison was running then, not toward Dall, but toward the shop, and there was a cold ball of dread bouncing around in his stomach. He dashed into the shop and saw Jeek slumped over his work bench, his hand pressed to his left shoulder. The little gunsmith looked up at Allison and tried to grin, but he didn't get very far with it.

"Ain't this a hell of a note, doc?" Jeek said through clenched teeth.

Allison bent over him. "Let's have a look at it," he said.

Jeek took his hand away from his shoulder and his fingers were red. Allison ripped the shirt away and examined the wound, not liking what he saw. The bul-

let had lodged. "It will have to come out, Jeek," he said gravely.

Allison worked swiftly and he found that the old skill was still in his hands. Jeek winced when he used the probe, but the oldster kept talking. "I was putting a new firing pin on a fellow's gun and the thing went off."

Just then Andy Clovis stuck his head in the door and said, "The stage pulled out, doc, and Dall was on it. He was scared to death. I told him you'd come after him no matter where he went; that you'd kill him sure. He must have believed it because he did some talking, told what really happened that night."

Allison turned around and looked at Jeek while he slowly unbuckled the gunbelt and laid it on the counter. "I won't be needing that any more," he said. "Jeek, how does a man grow big enough to do something like you did?"

The gunsmith dropped his eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about, Brent."

Allison's face was relaxed now and he smiled. "You're a poor liar, Jeek. That gun didn't go off accidentally."

Jeek looked up at him then, his face serious. "I figured I had to do something, and I was getting desperate. You got a tough break, Brent, but two years ain't so much to lose when you're young."

He turned toward the door, and watching him, Jeek said, "Where you going?"

Allison didn't stop, but he said over his shoulder, "To see a young lady, Jeek."

Jeek Minger blinked the mist from his eyes. "She's been waiting a long time, Brent."

"Too long," Allison said, and then he was walking down the street and inside he felt clean and good. A man stepped out of a doorway and said, "Welcome home, doc."

Allison smiled and said, "Thanks. It's good to be back."

GUNDOWN CROSSING

The drumming signal of the
oncomer was near and loud. . .



By
GIFF
CHESHIRE

*Three men met at that hell-water
crossing—one who had killed, one
who had died . . . and one who
meant to make it to the other side
—alone!*

THE thought of putting his ferry-boat across the flooded upper Rogue on such a stormy night roughened Andy Dalin's temper as he emerged from the shelter shack on the landing. Wind slatted his raincoat wetly against his long legs, momentarily upsetting his balance, and he growled a bitter opinion of wayfarers too stupid to keep indoors.

The telegraphy of beating hoofs, which had brought him forth, changed into two riders thundering out of the night and clattering down to the landing stage. The striped glitter of a pair of lanterns at the scow railings scattered thin, yellow light into their faces. Andy settled his attention upon those features and experienced a quick ridging of the muscles across his back.

"Where's the operator?" a well remembered voice bawled out. "Is this Dalin's Ferry or ain't it? Howdy there, Andy, and shake a leg. The lady and me don't aim to set in this souser all night." It was an elated voice, teeming with excitement, and this alone told Andy that Miles Huber was up to no good. High-keyed stimulation was a tonic Huber required, and he derived it mostly from baldly defying the standards of responsible men.

Something damned up Andy's answer, which he recognized as an impulse only partly shaped. He looked again to make certain the girl was really Louise Beecham, seeing dismally that he had made no mistake. It was ten o'clock on a bad night, and she was a long way from home.

The girl was a small, drenched figure that seemed forlorn in the big man's saddle. She had looked at Andy, but as he re-examined her she glanced away quickly. He thought he saw her shoulders set, her chin coming up in the old antagonistic way. It put a needling in his forehead which caused him to turn in a restless swing.

"I'm laid up till morning, Huber," he announced flatly. "Busted a sheave pin on my last trip. That water's rough and it's running fast."

Huber straightened. "Fix it, Dalin."

Andy was lying, out of some dim compulsion, and he knew signs of this were in his manner for he was not practiced in the art. The naked command in Huber's

words only set Andy in his determination not to put the pair across the river until he knew why Louise Beecham was along. Huber had a power over Andy Dalin, a horrible and tremendous power, and was in no way diffident about using it. His callous confidence in it released all the bitter hatred in the ferryman.

Andy spoke sharply. "Only the blacksmith down in Jacksonville could fix it. The ferry might not be running for a couple of days. There's a crossing twenty miles down if you figure you could swim your horses through that wild water, Huber. Or you could likely hit Evans's Ferry by daylight."

"Reckon you could wire it together somehow, Andy."

"I won't patch up any sheave and trust our lives and my scow to it."

"You're lyin'. You don't like me, Dalin, but you've sort of gone along, up till now."

"A man can make a change," Andy snapped. He looped up at Louise. "Miss Beecham, you look soaked through. Why don't you go to the cabin and warm up? Ma'd be glad to have you."

There had been another time when he had extended sympathy, and the offer had only roused hostility in Louise. It had never changed. Andy saw it work now, and was surprised when she assented.

"Maybe I ought. I'm sure cold."

Andy heard Huber's undertoned protest without giving sign that he had. He aimed to talk to Huber privately, and he stepped to the bridle of Louise's horse, grasped it and started up the soggy road. His cabin and the small log-built store, which were the start of a town he hoped to build at this crossing, stood in washed darkness beyond the crown of the river bank. His mother was in bed, but she would be glad to rise, as she did often to lend comfort to passersby in these remote parts.

He helped Louise to dismount at the cabin door, her wet skirts slapping

against his hand, and was surprised at the firmness of her small arm when he took it. He stepped ahead into the cabin and lighted a lamp, and she hesitated about entering until he had called out to rouse his mother. This instinctive, fastidious caution fitted the looks of her; the deep wonder in Andy's mind was why she had lent her trust so completely to a man like Miles Huber.

"We got a wet girl who needs drying out, ma," Andy said, when his mother came out of a bedroom belting a wrapper over her nightgown.

"Why, it's the Beecham girl. What're you doing down here this time of night?"

Louise said nothing. Her wet, pretty face told Andy of the fatigue that weighted her small, slim body. Or was it all fatigue? A person looked that way sometimes when uncertain, when a little time was needed to think. He wondered if he had managed to work a little self-doubt into her mind. With the question raised but unanswered, Andy went down to the landing, leading her saddle horse.

Miles Huber had dismounted and, the need for guardedness removed, he bristled in open hostility. "Dalin, you got some explaining to do."

"Reckon a little medicine talk wouldn't do anybody any harm," Andy admitted. "Go into the shack and warm yourself. I'll put up your horses."

"Never mind. We're going on. But I could use a shot of cougar spit."

"I got no liquor, but there's coffee on the stove."

LEAVING the horses to stand in the storm, a carelessness he disliked, Andy entered the shack. He poured a cup of coffee, which he extended to Huber, who had followed him in with hesitation.

"You running off with that girl?" Andy asked.

"Ah!" Huber breathed. "So that's

what's eating you. Well, what if I am? You sweet on her? And do you figure you can make time with her, if you are? She just don't seem to like you, Dalin. And she does like me. That settles it, or do you want to put up a scrap?"

"She's always resented me," Andy admitted, "but that's neither here nor there. It happens I know some things about you I guess she don't. Her pa's homestead up Baldy Creek's too far out to get much news. Anyhow, women don't hear all the things men do. Why a girl down-country killed herself, and another run off somewhere to hide. But I heard why, Huber. The talk went around."

Huber gave him a taunting grin, and to Andy's surprise there was actually a leering taint to it. "This here girl's made up her own mind. So we're running off to Yreka where we can get ourselves married."

"Where you *could*, if it don't slip your mind, Huber."

Huber drained his coffee, putting the cup down with indifferent sluggishness. "Don't you forget some things don't slip my mind, Andy. I don't aim to hang around here long. Clyde Beecham's had a idea his daughter might run away from him. That ornery skinflint don't aim to give up a good working hand. Louise's got a notion he won't be long finding out she's done it. He's been checking lately to see if she's been slipping out to see me. If Beecham's on our trail, I don't aim to let him get too close. That mean son'd gun me, sure as shooting." A real worry flickered on Huber's face.

It was a coarse but handsome face, a little older than Andy's, and showing an etching of intemperate wants. In body Huber was broader than Andy, though not quite so tall. He carried himself lightly, swiftly, and with restlessness.

"I guess she's not running away with you so much as she's running away from her pa." Andy said it casually, for he

was really thinking aloud. All settlers had to live austere, and they had to work hard. Beecham prided himself on both virtues, but folks said he drove himself only to an extent necessary to drive his broken-down wife and his daughter to their limits.

Again taunting roughened the heavy lines of Huber's face. "You figure you ought to send her back, Andy? Maybe you ain't heard everything. Clyde's set his mind on her getting married, anyhow. To that nitwit Lote Glass who's got the claim next to Clyde. You ever seen that grinning son? Clyde figures if he can make Louise marry Glass he'll have Glass's claim to run like his own and an extra hand in Glass. You want to send her back to that?"

"I don't know." The pressures of a stopped-up urge were shaking Andy. The only way to halt this man was to destroy him, and who had a greater need or right than Andy Dalin? But Huber was determined to use his hold, which would decide the question, anyhow. This interference was foolhardy, for it was wholly futile.

Concern twitched the pouches under Huber's eyes, and he gave his interest to strained, hard listening. Then Andy heard it, the fast, heavy thump of hoofs on the sloshy road, in the direction in which he had first picked up the warning of Huber's coming. There was more than one horse, and they were traveling hurriedly.

Huber swore, and said, "If that's Beecham, I'm going to do worse than put a slug through your guts. I'm going to tell your mother how your kid brother got shot, that night. I'm going to tell her it wasn't any hunting accident, like you led her to think. I'm going to let her know her bright-eyed boy just wasn't the little angel she figured."

It was out, yet the threat disgusted Andy as much as it frightened him. This was the measure of Huber's courage,

Huber the raider who plundered on the sly and feared the men he thus outraged more than his own conscience. For an instant Andy thought he was going to dive for the man's throat.

"The minute you do, Huber," he growled, "I'm free of you. Don't forget that. You can do your damage once, and after that my hands ain't tied. If I don't kill you first, that's the minute you'll be on your way to jail."

The horses whirled up, and there proved to be two. Andy kept inside, Huber waiting with his hand on his gun. The door burst open, and one man came in. It was not Clyde Beecham, nor anybody connected with Louise. The man was bearded, heavily clad and thoroughly rain-soaked. He was excited, and he didn't seem to notice the hand Huber let fall away from his gun.

"Can we get across?" the stranger asked. "I got to get my pardner to a doctor. We been on a prospect on the South Umpqua and tried to come back along Trail Creek. Brushed too close to the Injun reservation, I guess. Jumped a handful of mean bucks. Gabe got a arrow in his shoulder. I yanked it out but the place's torn up and festering. Gabe's got a fever. He's sort of out of his head."

Huber's body slacked, amusement kindling in his eyes. "Ferry's out of order, stranger. Waiting to get across, myself."

There was alarm on the miner's dripping face. "When can we get over?"

Andy swallowed, but made an instant decision. "Right now. The man's wrong. The ferry's working." He saw a triumphant smile bloom on Huber's mouth.

Huber came outside on Andy's heels, growling, "Don't shove off till I'm back with Louise, bucko, if you don't want your ma to get an earful of bad news." He swung onto his horse and harried it up the bank, leading the other.

Though he performed the chores necessary to casting off, Andy had a bad

moment of indecision. Was he wrong for having kept the truth from his mother? When his brother Noel had been shot and mortally wounded, six months ago, helping Huber in an unsuccessful attempt to hold up a gold dust runner, Andy had felt otherwise.

He cast off the mooring lines and dropped the chain, waving the two riders aboard the bobbing scow. Away from the bank's protecting brush, the wind cut at him sharply and created a hollow moan about his ears. The brown, swift water dimpled heavily under the slashing rain, as far as the lanterns threw their light. At the stern leeboard, Andy hesitated again. He heard horses, cut from sight by the climb of the river bank, and he shoved the handle down hard.

The scow jerked as the current carried it offshore. Both horses stumbled, shook their heads and snorted. One miner cursed a blunt solace, but the other was slumped in the saddle. Andy heard a rough shout from behind but he kept his foot heavily on the drag, and through the blackened rain he could hear the traveling squawl of the cable trolley whose slings guided the scow across. He let the nose thump hard on the far float, then dropped chain and waved the riders ashore. There was a second of satisfaction in seeing them disappear over the rise, unimpeded now on their way to a doctor's help. Then dread rose in him as he faced the recrossing to the home side.

MORE than Huber's shouted ire, questions troubled him. Maybe he had only worsened matters by sitting in lenient judgment upon his brother. Maybe, as blood kin, he had been too understanding of a kid's high-spirited impulses. Maybe he should have tried to stop it when Noel first started running with Huber. Noel had liked the high good times in the mining camps. He had needed money for them, and the results

had been inevitable right from the start.

No damage to others had resulted from the misfired hold-up. The mounted expressman, carrying dust from the southern Oregon mines to Yreka, had proved alert and capable. Huber had come off unscathed, though without profit, and had remained unsuspected. But Noel took mortal lead in the belly, though also unrecognized by the dust runner. Noel lived long enough to ride back to the ferry landing.

He died on this very float, begging Andy to tell their mother it was the result of an accidentally fired gun. Andy had agreed, figuring that the repentent dead, whatever their guilt in life, were entitled to a decent respect and repose, not realizing he was thus helping cover Miles Huber's guilt. Twice since, Huber had blackmailed him for small sums of spending money by threatening to tell the true story to Martha Dalin.

It was mainly a piece of maliciousness, for Huber understood that he would do so at the expense of lighting a fast shuck out of the country before the authorities came for him. Huber apparently was leaving for good now, taking Louise Beecham with him, but he would be willing to carry out the threat, if challenged. . . .

With harsh recklessness, Andy shoved down the leeboard and sent the scow surging on its return trip. Guilty or not, Andy Dalin was partly responsible for Huber's being here, this night, his designs now settled upon Louise.

When the lanterns swinging in on the ferry dimly lighted the bank, Andy saw that Huber waited there alone. The raw fear wormed through Andy that Louise had changed her mind under Martha Dalin's understanding urging and refused to go any farther. If she had, Huber might well have vented his spleen on both women.

This terror was struck deep in Andy when Huber spoke. "Well, your ma is as

stubborn as you. Louise was asleep. Your ma wouldn't even let me in to wake her up. Maybe I'll give you a chance to talk her into it, Andy, before I give her a earful."

"Come on," Andy said, the ferry secured. He was eased a little from the simple fact that he had a few more moments of time. He passed the shack and trudged up the bank, Huber's horse planting its feet suckingly into the gumbo of the road.

Andy had a sick tension in his stomach that was echoed in the nerves between his shoulders. He knew now he ought to give in, that he was too helplessly in Huber's clutches to fight the man. Louise had disliked him for a long while, anyhow. If she realized he was bucking her plans, the knowledge would set her determination strongly. The whole country would be glad to see her escape her father; his treatment of the girl had been a scandal. Who was to say she would be worse off with Miles Huber than with Clyde Beecham or Lote Glass? Andy realized he hated to side with Beecham as much as he hated to submit to Huber.

If she had been asleep before, Louise was awake and up when Andy stepped into the cabin, after calling reassurance to his mother through the door. Huber came in on Andy's heels, grinning his triumph at Martha Dalin. Louise kept turned from the men, her gaze studiously on the flames in the fireplace. Her coat was steaming across the back of a chair there.

Something tugged at Andy's heart, and he realized he had been drawn to her more strongly each time she had crossed the river on his ferry. There was something about her which struck a deep response in him, and in this moment of futility he understood its meaning. He loved her himself, as Huber had claimed; he guessed he had the first time he laid eyes on her, without knowing it.

Andy ignored his mother's anxious

eyes. "Huber figures he's ready to light out again, Louise. To my notion you ought to wait till daylight, anyhow. You got rough country ahead, and it's a long ways to any settlement."

Huber let the veiled dissuasion ride, perhaps welcoming a chance to demonstrate his power over Louise. Huber understood her real drives, the lot in life producing them, as well as did Andy Dalin and his mother. But Huber was exploiting them cynically and without pity, and Andy was certain then that the girl was unaware of it.

Louise swung around. "I'll be ready as soon as possible." For an instant her gaze touched Andy's, and he realized in plummeting regret that he seemed to have prodded her the wrong way with his suggestion.

Huber was chuckling softly as he went outside, Andy following. Wind and rain slashed and beat at them, and they hurried to the landing shelter to wait for Louise. Andy had no more to say, for she had decided the question.

Something laid a weight on his heart that seemed physical. Within the warm shack, Huber poured himself the last of the coffee, then dried his hands and shaped a cigarette. But he kept guard, well aware that Andy might swing on him at the least chance. Then once more Huber was on his feet and listening with sharp intentness.

He had acute ears, for it was a moment before Andy could pick out the beat of hoofs in the storm racket. Fear and ugly rancour were trapped again on Huber's face.

"This time it just ain't apt to be some strayed miners, or anybody else but Clyde Beecham!" he snapped. "Get your ferry ready to shove while I fetch Louise."

Hope boiled up in Andy, for he had forgotten Huber's gnawing worry that Beecham might take after them. Suddenly Andy hungered to see the two men con-

front each other, each a withering force of evil in his separate way, each deserving the worst the other could offer. Yet he knew the problem had become his personal and vital responsibility.

He followed as Huber whirled and plunged out the door. He heard Louise call from the darkness of the cabin trail and Huber's urgent shout for her to hurry. Andy swung toward the ferry with decision made conclusively, knowing that he had to get them away from this float before the rider reached it.

Huber had helped Louise asaddle, and the horses had clattered onto the ferry by the time Andy had cast off. The drumming signal of the oncomer was near and loud. Andy shoved in his drag, catching the rough current upon it and sweeping into the rushing stream with impetus that almost threw the horses from their feet. Huber cursed, but with urging rather than protest. The sheave squawled on the cable; the rider whirled up on the landing stage.

It was Clyde Beecham, who bawled, "Dalin! Who you got there? Blast you, if it's my girl fetch her back!"

ANDY kept going. He let the ferry ride at full speed, pulled dangerously tight on its slings, the upstream water pressure giving the deck a threatening tilt. He slacked at the precise second to nose hard against the off landing, saw it throw horses and riders into a rough tangle; then he bolted for the landing to snub in.

Cursing with no consideration for Louise's presence, Huber had scrambled to his feet by the time Andy swung back. He seemed more concerned in getting his own horse up and under him than about Louise. Thus he was unprepared when Andy clamped a hand on his shoulder and swung him around.

"I got a river between you and my mother now!" Andy said. "This is the

float where Noel Dalin died. Because of you, mainly, and because he was a head-strong kid. But he died like a man. And here's where I'm going to kill you. Because you'll never be a man and because you'll keep on wrecking lives if I don't." His voice had the cold, running snap of cracking ice.

Huber kept swearing, blending the full desperation of his mind into it. He belted Andy with the edge of his fist, trying to get his gun into the other hand. In that instant Andy forgot Louise, everything but the night Noel died and the things that would still come from this man if he lived. He kicked into Huber's belly as the weapon came out, saw it drop to the wet deck. He went after the man in cold, punitive rage.

He had known he would be against odds and was not surprised to encounter a withering return assault. He pounded his fists on Huber's face and ribs before he took a rocking blow on the mouth. It sent him staggering back until the scow railing crashed against his shoulders. Huber kept driving, sucking an exultant breath. He drove a shoulder against Andy's throat, pressing him hard, trying to snap his spine across the railing.

Reflexes carried Andy through. He caught Huber's head under his arm, and Huber tried to use the purchase to swing him from his feet. Andy put his weight on that side, trying to break the rigid arch of Huber's heavy back. Then his boot skidded on the wet decking, and he splatted flat. But he brought Huber down with him.

The first fear roughened through him when Huber seized the new chance, attempting to crowd him under the railing and into the river's brawling torrent. Andy was on the outer side, precious inches separating him from the edge of the deck. Huber angled hard across him, pinning him so he could not wrench over and seize the rail.

Down on elbows and knees, Huber lowered a shoulder and rammed it hard into Andy's side.

It tore loose the clutching fingers Andy tried to drag onto the deck, but in that instant the face of Louise appeared above them. She held a marlin spike she must have grabbed out of his tool kit. As she raised and swung it, Andy groaned, nearly heaving himself into the water to get away. The spike hit and glanced off Huber's shoulder, and Huber hauled to his knees.

Amazed that her attack had not been directed at himself, Andy scrambled up as Huber launched toward Louise. She raised the spike again, but before she swung it Andy had nailed the man. Huber pivoted, trapped and desperate, wholly wild. Andy belted him so hard the sagging hulk crashed backward into the railing. The last moral doubt in him was resolved; there was wickedness and unrelieved destructiveness. He caught the man and hurled him over the railing.

Ease came to him then, and a sense of vindication. He was not killing Huber. A man might swim out of that storm-battered stream down there.

He turned to Louise. "You helped me. Why not him?"

Small and frightened, Louise stood in the pale lantern light. But there was erectness to her body, a new kind of dignity seemed to have appeared. "I reckon I made a good choice, Andy Dalin. . . ."

Beecham stood on spread legs on the float, beside his horse and with his back hunched against the wind. As the lanterns swung in on the ferry, they illuminated his grin of satisfaction.

"Your lanterns gave me a good look at what happened over there, Dalin!" Beecham bawled. "You fixed that polecat proper and saved me a slug. I appreciate that, boy. I'll take my miss home, now."

Andy walked ashore, the man's fawning gratitude sickening him. He faced

Beecham calmly. "Fork your horse and clear out, Beecham. Louise don't have to go back till she's ready to go in her mind. Hope she never is. Hope she'll stay and live with ma, anyhow till she gets straightened out in her head."

Beecham bristled, the pasty gratitude washed out of his face in a flood of unchecked animosity. But when Andy took a quick step forward, the man drew back. "She's coming home," Beecham said.

It was not desperate rebellion that Louise gave her father, this time, but a calm, dignified resolve. "Reckon not, pa. Reckon I'll stay and visit a while."

Beecham had seen what had happened to Miles Huber on the far side of the river. The bluster went out of him as he stared at Andy, who stood with bunched fists. He turned and climbed up on his horse and rode off without speaking.

"So you don't think so poorly of me any more," Andy said, after a long moment.

It brought the first smile onto her lips he had ever seen. "Never did, really. I was so ashamed of pa, and of myself, it made me boiling mad to have anybody show he saw there was any need of it."

"Still don't know why you changed your mind about Huber."

"Don't reckon I did. Something changed it for me. Something in your eyes when you looked at me I never saw in a man's eyes before. It made me wish I didn't have to go on with Miles Huber, but I'd promised him. Then when he showed what was really inside of him, I didn't figure the promise held, any more."

It took only a few minutes to secure things for the night, and it did not surprise Andy to see Louise pitch in and help him, following his lead with real handiness. Then they went up the trail to the cabin, she beside him. Andy hoped she would decide to make it more than a visit and had a feeling she might. As far as he was concerned, she was here for good.

BULLETS BAR THIS TRAIL



The man fell full length in the muddy ruts, and then lay still. . . .

By LES
SAVAGE,
Jr.

"If you're gonna kill to prove you're right, amigo—you'd better get ready to die—to prove I am!"

WHEN Tracy Bannerman saw the shadowy flutter in the dense stand of pines covering the slope above the Montana road, he could not help pulling the horses in. He felt Carol Hastings stir impatiently on the seat of the buck-board beside him.

"Why are you so jumpy, Tracy?" she asked. "Are you and Hal on a job?"

"What makes you think that?" he said.

"I saw Larry Coates in town yesterday," she said. "He wouldn't be down here for anything except borrowing money to pick up that option on the Golden Ace. And he wouldn't pick it up unless the mine had started paying off. The balance of the option is due tomorrow, isn't it? That's an awfully short time to reach Butte from here. A man Coates's age could never make a ride like that. So he put the money in the hands of the Bannerman-Wells Detective Agency."

Hal Wells was sitting on Carol's other side, and he turned in a sharp anger to say something, but Bannerman cut him off with a wry smile, and a shrug of his shoulders. "Never mind, Hal. If she's figured out that much, why try and keep it secret? You're right, Carol. Trask and Company thought the Golden Ace was worthless when they gave that year's option to Coates. Now the ore has started assaying out fifty dollars a ton. The bank here wouldn't make Coates the loan, so he went to Doonhaven. Trask wouldn't take Doonhaven's check, so it had to be in cash. You can see why we were so reluctant to even give you a lift from town to your house."

She looked at the Gladstone bag on the footboards beneath Bannerman's knees. "Do you think Trask will try to stop you?"

"Tracy wouldn't get spooky over anything else," Wells told her. "Trask and Company have been running in the red themselves lately. If we don't pick up the option in time for Coates, the mine reverts to them. It would just about save their skins."

Bannerman had shaken the reins out again, lifting the horses to a trot. He was so broad he looked short on the seat, with his shoulders spreading remarkably beneath his sack coat. In the evening dusk, his square, aggressive face had a vague coppery tint, with dull shadows pooling the eye-sockets beneath his brow.

Those same twilight shadows formed the shape of Carol's face, casting the rich flesh into a softened, satiny texture. The fact that she was Hal's, now, only seemed to intensify her beauty for Bannerman. *Like a kid*, he thought, *not really knowing how much he had wanted something until it belonged to someone else.*

She was a large woman, with black hair pulled back severely to a glossy bun at the nape of her neck, and a figure that shamed the painful cheapness of her gingham dress, beneath the wine cloak she wore. To Bannerman, that dress symbolized the poverty he would always associate with Carol.

She had been sixteen when he first met her, and in that very year, the hardships of the Hastings' barren Montana farm had killed her mother, leaving Carol to eke out an existence with a defeated, viciously frustrated father whose neurotic claims of ill-health kept her with him even after she was old enough to leave. Carol's resentment of her circumstances had grown to a bitter hatred, focussing her mind upon the thought of escape until it had become almost an obsession. That side of Carol had always disturbed Bannerman, making him wonder when the breaking point would come, and just how far she would go to gain her ends when it did come.

Some movement from Hal Wells drew Bannerman's attention to the man. Wells was bent forward on the seat, staring up into the trees. The darting brightness of his eyes reflected even this fading light, and the skin of his face was drawn taut over the sharp angles of cheek and jaw by the tension of his raised head.

"You were right, Tracy," he said. "There is someone among those trees."

BANNERMAN drew the horses in so hard one of them squealed. He was shoving his coattails off the butt of his .45 when the man walked out

of the pines. He came like a blind man, zig-zagging and stumbling down the slope into the ditch beside the road. He went to his knees there, and crawled up the shoulder onto the road itself. Then he fell full length in the muddy ruts, and lay still.

Bannerman's jaws ground together in a moment of hesitation. Then he shook the reins and set the wagon to rolling once more, halting it when they reached the man. Wells was swinging down before the wagon had stopped, the tall whipping length of him moving with the nervous vitality that never let him rest. Bannerman alighted more cautiously, taking a look into timber on either side of the road before he went forward. It was a kid of nineteen or twenty, lying on one side, black hair slickened from sweating, pale face smudged with dirt. Bannerman squatted down beside him.

"It's Eddie Saxon," he said. "I know his dad over near Helena."

The boy's eyes opened, lighting with hope when they saw Bannerman. "I was hunting in Belknap Canyon," he said weakly. "Using that old Sharps of dad's. Stumbled. It went off at my leg."

Bannerman fished out his pocket knife and slit the blood-soaked leg of the boy's jeans up to the hip. Then he asked Wells to get the old blanket from under the seat of the buckboard. He cut this in strips for tourniquet and bandages. When he was finished, the bleeding had stopped, but the boy seemed to have lost consciousness. They got him into the bed of the wagon, then gathered at the front wheel.

"Shot himself," said Wells, thinly. "That's a likely story."

"I guess we all know what a wild kid he's been," said Bannerman. "Whether he's telling the truth or whether he's in some kind of trouble, I wouldn't give him much chance without a doctor pretty quick. All that blood looks like an artery."

"It's fifteen miles back to Great Falls, Tracy," said Wells. "If we take him

back, we'll never be able to reach Butte in time."

"Your place is only three miles, Carol," said Bannerman.

"Dad's in Helena with the wagon and won't be back till tomorrow," she told them. "There isn't anybody nearer than Great Falls with another rig. Couldn't you take him on through to Butte, Tracy? Doctor Miller is there."

"How could we do that?" said Wells, swiftly. "What if a bunch of Trask boys jump us? What kind of clay pigeons would we look like with a man this bad off in our wagon? We can drop him at your place, Carol. He'll last till your dad gets back tomorrow."

"How can you be so sure?" she said, heatedly. She turned to Bannerman with a soft plea in her voice. "Tracy—"

The heavy, square bones shone dully through the weather-stained flesh of Bannerman's cheeks as he dipped his head until his eyes were staring unseeingly at the road. Wells's boots shifted nervously in the mud.

"Forty thousand dollars, Tracy," he said, in a hurried, almost desperate way. "That's an awful big responsibility. Make it and they'll come flocking to you with deals. Muff it because of something like this, and nobody in the Territory would trust you with another job."

Bannerman shook his head doggedly, knowing how right Wells was. It had been hard enough establishing the detective agency. It was not an unknown thing out here. The Rocky Mountain Detective Association had been established in Denver since 1863. But it was a hard pull for a man without much reputation or backing. Even Hal's gilded tongue had not moved mountains. Wells had come to Bannerman two years ago, convincing him what they could accomplish by pooling their talents. The man's personality and salesmanship had oiled the way to more jobs than Bannerman himself had been

getting, but they had never gained the glittering goals Wells had held out at first. Perhaps that was why Wells's innate restlessness had grown so noticeable these last months. That restlessness had always been a doubtful factor in Bannerman's mind.

Carol's hand on Bannerman's arm broke into his thoughts. "Tracy," she said. "Could you ever face yourself again, if you didn't take the boy, and he died?"

Bannerman's chest swelled with a heavy breath. "I guess you're right, Carol. We'll take him."

"I'll go too," she said.

"Don't be foolish, Carol," snapped Wells.

She faced toward him, speaking with quiet, tight-lipped emphasis. "Hal, if there's going to be trouble, wouldn't it be better to have someone along to watch Saxon, and leave both of you free to handle it?"

Wells swung sharply to Bannerman, his voice savage. "Tracy, you can't. I won't let Carol come like this—"

"What makes you so dead set against it, Hal?" asked Bannerman, suspiciously.

Something like guilt fluttered through Wells's eyes. Then he lowered his sharp chin sullenly. "Forty thousand dollars is a lot of money, Tracy."

"It is, Hal, it is." Bannerman studied Wells's face narrowly. "It can make a man's eyes bigger than his stomach, sometimes."

"Now what are you talking about?" asked Wells.

Bannerman turned to climb into the wagon, saying nothing.

THE road ran southward, past the Hastings farm near the Little Fork Cutoff, paralleling the Missouri all the way. The river filled the coming night with the roaring sound of its intumescent spring tides, and on the other side of the road, tamarack backed densely into the

foothills, dripping incessantly from the earlier rain. Bannerman drove the buckboard, working at the team in grim silence whenever the viscid mud fought the front wheels and set the tongue to whipping.

They had made a makeshift bed of hay and blankets for the wounded boy, and Carol sat back there with him. Soon, Bannerman became aware of Wells's eyes on him, and turned an oblique glance to the man.

"What's on your mind, Hal?"

"Nothing much," answered Wells.

"Mad about this?"

"Aren't you?"

"I guess I am, Hal. Nothing else on your mind?"

"Lot of things. This trip isn't going to be any vacation."

"I didn't mean that." Bannerman watched the trotting horses darkly before he spoke again. "You know, Hal, we've been working together in this agency over two years now. Yet sometimes I feel as if I don't know you at all."

"There's parts of every man nobody will ever see," said Wells, emitting a sharp, humorless chuckle. "Maybe they'd be sorry if they did."

"I guess you're right," Bannerman told him. "Don't ever make me sorry, Hal."

Wells's head turned toward Bannerman so abruptly it caused his body to shift against the seat, creaking the boards. But Bannerman did not elaborate, and finally Wells settled back. Light from the rising moon glistened on the poplar leaves and turned the water in the muddy ruts to copper. The laboring wheels groaned against their axles. A horse snorted fretfully and tossed its head. These were the only sounds as the miles passed behind, until almost midnight, when they reached the way station at Bird Tail Divide.

The lighted windows threw elongated rectangles across the road in front of the building, bright as yellow paint, and Ban-

nerman was reluctant to reveal the wagon by pulling into this illumination. He drew the team to a halt in the shadows of the corral, fifty feet from the front door.

"I guess all of us could do with something hot, Hal," he said. "Want to get it?"

Wells did not try to hide his reluctance as he stepped off. There was the muffled hiss of clothing against Carol's shifting body, behind Bannerman. Then the spring seat was depressed beneath her settling weight.

"Mind if I sit up here and stretch a bit?" she said. "Gets a little cramped back there."

"I imagine," said Bannerman. "How is the boy?"

"Resting easy."

He did not realize how closely he was watching her until, in some self-conscious gesture, she reached up to smooth the cloak down over one shoulder.

"It's a pretty cloak," he said.

"Tracy, you don't have to be like that."

"I mean it," he said.

"It's just an old hand-me-down so thin it doesn't keep me warm any more. Now stop it."

"It's still a pretty cloak," he said, quietly. "A gunnysack would look pretty on you."

Moonlight caught the flush rising into her face. "Will you never understand what those things can mean to a woman?"

"Maybe I understand better than you realize, Carol," he said.

She turned partly away, with the old contention rising between them to mar the moment. Bannerman studied the curve of her cheek, knowing a poignant wish that he could give her his values in the judgment of things. He often wondered, actually, what values Hal Wells had given her, wondered how much her choice had been due to Hal's glib tongue, and how much to the man himself.

"I've never blamed you for your desire

to escape your present circumstances, Carol," he said softly. "I never even blamed you for turning me down because I couldn't give you what you wanted. You've had a bitter time. I only hope it hasn't twisted your conception of things enough to drive you into something you'll be sorry for."

"It isn't like you to talk this way," she said.

"I wasn't implying Hal," he said. "I've already accepted the fact that you will marry him, Carol, if that's the way you want it."

"Then what were you implying?"

He frowned at her in a puzzled way. "I don't know," he said. Then he found his eyes drifting to the Gladstone bag, beneath his legs, and it struck him how similar Carol and Wells were in their driven need to rise above their present circumstances.

"How did you happen to pick this particular day to be in town?" he asked. "You always shopped on Wednesday before."

"Tracy," she said irritably, "you're acting very strangely."

He shrugged. "I'm sorry. If we make this job, it will be a nice fee. Hal has already hinted he's going to pull out afterwards. Where will you go?"

"Denver, as soon as we're married. Hal says there's a lot going on there. A man with a little capital could do big things. When we're able, we'll send for dad." Her eyes shone a little, and he knew the visions that were passing before them. Then a shadow blotted out the glow, and she turned to him with a darkening doubt in her face.

"Tracy," she began. "Hal—"

He waited for her to go on, and when she did not, asked her, "What about Hal?"

"He didn't want to take the boy."

"Neither did I, Carol."

"But you gave in. If it had been up to

Hal, he wouldn't have taken Saxon at all."

Bannerman shrugged. "Don't blame Hal. I'm sure, if he'd stopped to think—"

"Are you, Tracy?"

The tone of her voice focused his eyes sharply on her face. Before he could define what was there, Wells came from the way station with the coffee. They drank it quickly, and he took the cups back. When he climbed into the wagon once more, Bannerman gave him the reins.

BEYOND the way station was Bird Tail Divide, where the resinous scent of balsam poplars tainted the air like cheap perfume. Bannerman sat silently, jerked this way and that by the jolting wagon, listening to the muttered cursing of Wells as the man fought the team across rough stretches, the death rattle of wind through the thistle on exposed turns. Bannerman's whole awareness resided in these sounds, sifting them out, identifying them, waiting, always, for the foreign element. He could not have told the actual moment it finally reached him. They were on the other side of the divide, dropping down fast, with the brake shoes squawking like raucous birds under Wells's incessant braking, when Bannerman straightened up in the seat.

"What is it?" asked Wells.

"Feels like the ground shaking."

Long association with Bannerman's sensitivity for danger caused Wells to brake hard, pulling in the team as they swung down out of the last grade into the stagnant shadows of the hollow. The wagon was not completely halted when it burst upon them—a burgeoning tide of sound and movement exploding from the night to sweep over them and bring Wells up in the seat.

"There must be a hundred of them," he shouted, half-risen. "What'll we do, Tracy?"

Bannerman grabbed his arm, calling

sharply to him. "Just sit tight. This is too many for Trask."

Already the horses were flooding in around the wagon, smashing up against it as their riders drew them to a violent halt. The buckboard swam in a sea of lathered rumps and marbled eyes. The glitter of gunmetal fluttered through the crowd like sunlight reflected from a brassy sea. A rider came forcing his way in from the outer ranks, calling to Bannerman.

"Speak up. Who are you?"

"Tracy Bannerman," answered the detective. "On my way to Helena."

The rider had come in close enough for Bannerman to see, now. He was immense and bearlike in a shaggy sheepskin coat. Sweat made greasy channels of the deep, weathered lines forming his unshaven jowls.

"What's in the back?" he asked officiously.

"We've got a wounded man," said Bannerman.

"A wounded man!" It was almost a shout. "Keno, give me a light."

"What's the matter?" said Bannerman. "Who are you men?"

"I'm Con Fallon from Lodgepole. This is a posse with me, mister. Carney Rolph's bunch just held up the Helena stage and got away with a big chunk of Butte payroll money. Two people on the stage were murdered. One of them was a woman—"

The flare of a match cut him off. In its indefinite sphere of light, the face of the man named Keno was turned to a weird shadow-pocketed mask, as he leaned out of his saddle to stare into the buckboard.

"That's him," said Keno. "I'd swear it. He's the one I shot!"

The buckboard shuddered with the wild swirling motion that broke out anew among the riders, carrying their horses against the wagon from every side. There was something bestial to their hoarse voices as they shouted at each other,

shaking their guns in the air. Bannerman's whole body gathered itself.

Wells caught his arm, pulling him back to hiss in his ear, "Take it easy, Tracy. A payroll robbery means greenbacks. If you cause any trouble, they're liable to find this money on us."

The threat of that held Bannerman for a moment. Then he saw one of the men taking a rope from his saddle whangs and passing it through the riders. There was a hangnoose on it.

"You can't be that sure of this," shouted Bannerman, hauling up against Wells's frantic hand. "Where was that stage held up, Fallon?"

"Tracy!" Wells's voice was hardly audible over the surf of sound. "If this bunch is set for a hanging, you can't stop them. You know how crazy they are to get hold of Carney Rolph's gang in Helena. For the things he's done I'd hang him myself. For God's sake, don't get us mixed up in it."

The man named Keno was swinging down off his horse, along with another, and climbing into the stern of the wagon for the boy.

"Fallon," shouted Bannerman, fighting from Wells now. "If that was the Helena stage they robbed, it couldn't have been earlier than four-thirty. We picked this man up ten miles south of Great Falls at six o'clock this evening. He couldn't have gotten that far in so short a time."

"What's your interest in this, mister?" Fallon asked, hoarsely. "How do we know you ain't one of the Rolph bunch too? What have you got in that Gladstone?"

Carol's sharp cry wheeled Bannerman about to see that Keno had flung her backward from where she had been crouched above Eddie Saxon, trying to protect him. She staggered into Bannerman and went to her knees. Her face was like the fixed, waxen mask of a doll, turned upward toward Hal Wells. There was terror in her eyes, but behind that was a strange,

searching little light. Wells did not even see her.

"Tracy, please," he said, clinging to Bannerman's arm with hands so sweaty the sleeve was wet. "This is a lynch mob. Can't you see it in their faces? They're crazy for it. If they find that money on us, they'll lynch us too. For heaven's sake, now, he's a murderer, don't be a fool."

That light seemed to fade in Carol's eyes. They became as blank, as soulless as stones in her head, as she stared up at Wells.

"Come on, damn it," said Keno, tugging at Saxon.

The boy groaned, as they started sliding him out the rear. Carol's eyes were on Bannerman now. There was no expression left to them. She was just watching him. Bannerman tore Wells's hand free and jumped over Carol.

"Tracy," screamed Wells.

Bannerman's jump carried him to Keno before any of the men in the crowd could line up a gun on him. Then they were afraid to shoot, for fear of hitting Keno and the other man in the wagon. Bannerman used that fact, throwing himself between them and pulling at his Bisley. Keno tried to straighten up from the wounded boy, but Bannerman caught his elbow with a free hand, swinging him around hard and jabbing the gun into his back.

Keno's efforts ceased abruptly. The sound seemed to die, too. At first, Bannerman thought it was what he had done here. Then he realized Keno was looking at something up front, and so were the men along the inner ranks of horsemen. Bannerman must have kicked it off the seat when he jumped for Keno. The Gladstone bag lay on its side in the bed of the wagon, and it had come open, to spill out a stack of fresh green bills.

"The money!" The husky restraint of Fallon's voice sounded strange, after all

the shouting. "They had the money right there beside them all the time—"

The sudden bedlam of sound drowned his voice. The wild shouting of men, the squeal of frenzied horses, the splintering of wood in the wagon as it shuddered and tilted under the battering of the animals, in a renewal of the crowd's violent eddying. Bannerman stood holding the Bisle to Keno's back, his whole body raised up with the expectancy of that first shock of bullets from a dozen guns pointed at him. Slowly, however, the noise faded, until he could be heard.

"I'm glad you don't want to kill your friend here that way," he said. "Now, which one of you is the sheriff?"

"There ain't no sheriff," Fallon told him, rage swelling his throat.

"You're doing this without the law?" asked Bannerman.

"Sheriff's over in Lodgepole Canyon with another part of the posse," Keno said hoarsely.

"I want one of you to ride for him," Bannerman told Fallon.

"Won't be necessary," offered a caustic voice. "He's done come."

The horsemen parted before that voice. It revealed a long, dour man with a mustache like Spanish moss drooping from his upper lip. He was followed by a line of horsemen coming single-file out of the timber, and he kneed his Choppo horse in through the steaming press to the wagon.

"Thought I'd better check up on you, Fallon," he said, squinting one jaundiced eye at the man, "before you got het up and hung the wrong party."

"But this is the whole Rolph gang, Holmes," shouted Fallon, pompously. "They've got the wounded man and the money—"

"Ain't no wounded man," interposed Sheriff Holmes. "He's dead. Cashed in his chips right in the middle of the Lodgepole road. We found all the money on his horse. So now, Fallon, if you'll turn

your self-appointed vigilante committee around and drag your spurs for home, I'll give this feller in the wagon one good, clear shot at your back."

Beyond Bird Tail Divide was Prickly Pear Valley, a moonswept expanse of grain fields and snake fences. Soon the moonlight drowned in the bat-blackness preceding dawn, and then, as this began to turn gray, the rain-dampened land started steaming with anticipation of the sun's warmth. Piegan Rock jumped out of the fog-shrouded gloom at the wagon, and Bannerman pulled up here. Though he could not see the Big Belt way station ahead, he knew it was about fifty yards beyond the rock.

"Why don't you go on in, Tracy?" grumbled Wells, stirring stiffly on the seat. "We all rate a little stretch and a good hot meal."

"I'll still play it safe," said Bannerman. "Too many men in that vigilante committee saw this money, and Trask hasn't made their bid yet. You and Carol go inside if you want."

Wells climbed down off the buckboard and turned toward Carol. "I'll help you down."

"I'll stay here," she said.

"Carol, you look tired. Tracy can watch Saxon."

"I'll stay here."

"Carol, will you get out of that wagon?"

"Why are you so anxious for me to come in, Hal?"

Something entered Wells's face that Bannerman had never seen before. For a moment, he thought Wells was going to reach up and grab Carol. Then the man wheeled in a sharp, vicious way and walked toward the buildings. Within a few feet, the fog had swallowed him.

"Tracy," said Carol, from behind, "will you get out of the wagon now?"

Bannerman turned to see her father's Derringer in her hand—pointed at him.

At the blank disbelief in his face, a tight look pinched in her eyes.

"Did you think Hal was the one who would double-cross you, Tracy?"

"Carol—"

"Never mind. I know you did. It's been in your mind from the beginning. There's no time to talk, now. Get off the wagon and take that bag with you."

He did as she asked. She got down and jerked the gun toward the opposite side of the road. Gray serpents of fog lashed at his legs as he walked over there, climbing into the deep ditch at her bidding. She followed, tearing her skirts on the rocks. Then Bannerman heard the quick, nervous thudding of Wells's boots, coming back.

"Tracy?" he called, softly. Then his voice lifted in a surprised stridor. "Tracy, where are you?" He climbed up on the wheel, looking into the bed. "Tracy," he shouted, "where are—"

A shot made a muffled detonation in the smothering fog. Wells dropped off the wagon, ducking back of a wheel.

"Norton," he called. "Stop. It's me, Wells. They're gone."

There was a moment without sound, then the hurried, crushed sibilance of feet running on fallen underbrush. Finally a wraithlike figure appeared at the tail of the wagon. A sliver of wet light ran along the barrel of a rifle swinging in one hand. The voice was thin and sharp.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," said Wells. "They were here when I left, just like I told you at the station."

"The hell you say, Hal. So you had it all figured out, did you? Keep me up by the station while they get away with it."

"No, Norton," said Wells. "I swear—"

"You're always swearing, but I never heard you cuss yet," shouted Norton. "Trask will have my hide for this. I could have got Bannerman if it wasn't for you."

"Norton, I tell you, I didn't know they planned this—"

Wells grabbed the end of the rifle barrel as Norton tried to swing it toward him. Bannerman realized the pressure of Carol's gun was no longer against his back, and half-turned his head for a glance at her. She was looking at him with a strained, waiting expression on her face.

With a sick intuition of what was going to happen, Bannerman turned back to the struggling figures and started scrambling up out of the ditch, pulling his own Bisle. Norton finally jumped backward, tearing the rifle from Wells's grasp.

"No, Norton," cried Wells.

Bannerman had that one shot, and he aimed high so the bullet wouldn't go through the wagon and hit the wounded boy.

Wells made no move to go for a gun, or anything else, as Bannerman ran toward him. Norton's face was made unrecognizable by the blood covering his head. He was dead.

"Was there going to be any shooting the way you'd planned it, Hal?" asked Bannerman.

"No, Tracy, I swear—"

"I believe you, Hal. It takes guts to plan on shooting." Bannerman drew in a slow, tired breath. "Sounds like some of the station crew coming, now. I don't want to waste time explaining. We're behind schedule as it is. You stay and explain, Hal. Tell them the truth. Tell them this man was hired to stop me from doing a job. They'll probably hold the inquest at Helena. Sheriff Holmes will know where to get me if they want me."

"But, Tracy, what about me?"

"They won't have anything to hold you for," said Bannerman. "Get out of Great Falls, Hal. That's all I ask."

Carol had brought the Gladstone bag, and after Bannerman climbed into the wagon, she set it on the seat. Wells

(Continued on page 130)



RIDIN' THE DRAG

*Them trail herd crews of long ago was sure 'nough organized
To keep the longhorns travelin'. You would maybe be surprised
To know that every cowhand, when the herd was on the move,
Done every day's long ridin', as you might say, in a groove.
The point man's special duty, way up yonder in the lead,
Was to show 'em whichaway to go, an' sorter set the speed
At which the cattle traveled, governed some by land an' weather,
So the strongest an' the weakest still would git there all together.
The hands that rode the flank an' swing, they kept the herd from spreadin'
They strung 'em out like some big snake across the prairies threadin'.
Sometimes they had to chouse off strays that come in from the sides.
The swing men didn't eat much dust upon them long ol' rides,
But 'way back yonder in the rear, attendin' to the lag,
The sure 'nough ol' dust-eaters was the men that rode the drag.
The lazy, weak an' wilful of the cattle in the drive,
They all bunched back there in the drags, a-tryin' to connive
Some way to keep from travelin'—an' they made it purty tough.*



By S. Omar Barker

*The drag men had to push 'em, but they dassent push too rough,
For if they'd crowd 'em too fast there would sure 'nough be a jam,
An' always there was some ol' steers that didn't give a damn
How hard a cowpoke whacked 'em on a lean an' bony hip—
They'd done decided long ago they didn't like the trip!
But others would git boogered if you whaled 'em with your twine,
An' maybe give some trouble gittin' choused back into line.
Yessir, them drag men savvied cow. They knew which ones to whale,
An' still let sure 'nough weak ones take it easy on the trail.
It took a heap of patience an' a heap of judgment, too,
To make a good drag rider out of any buckaroo.
It also called for cussin', or you'd plumb blow up an' bust,
A-suckin' down your goozlem all that cattle flavored dust!
The point men an' the flankers an' the tellers ridin' swing,
They prob'ly had their troubles, but they wasn't anything
Compared, in my opinion, to the woes that used to nag
Them dusty ol' dust-eatin' boys that rode the trail herd drag!*

TALES of the

by LEE

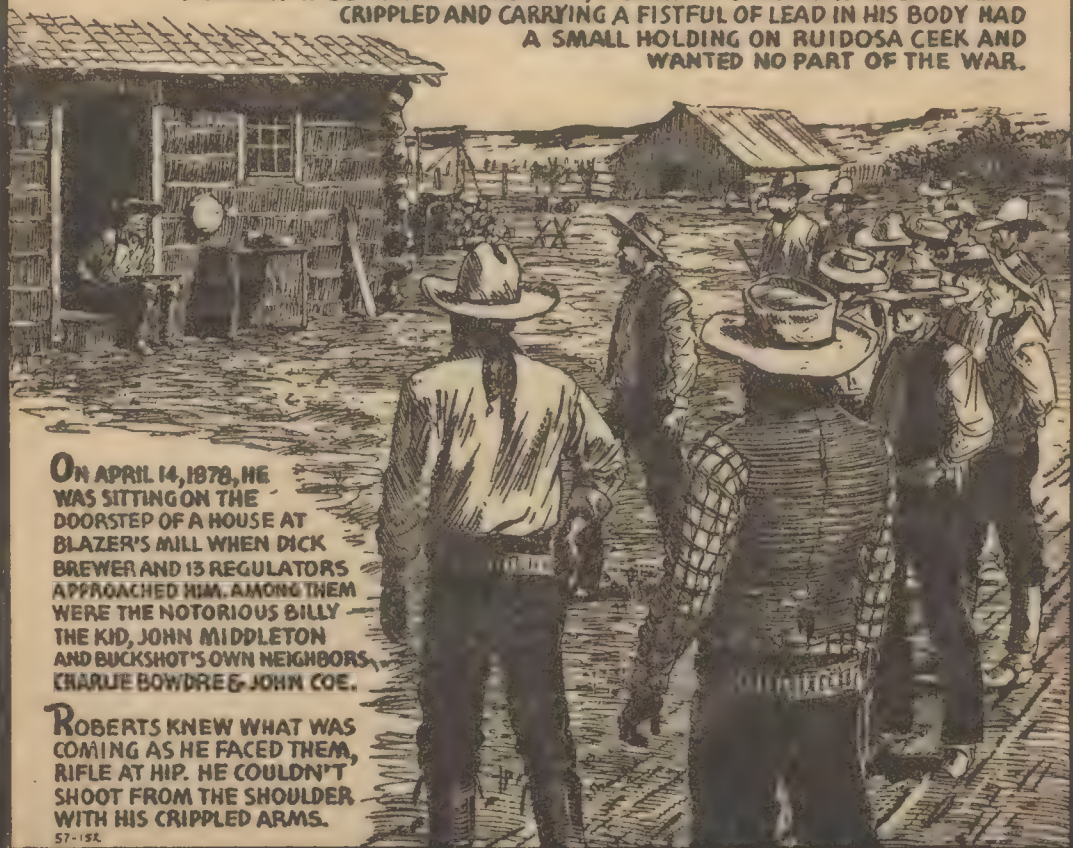


"Buckshot" Roberts' Gamble

IN THE ROARING SOUTHWEST MEN GAMBLED THEIR LIVES AGAINST FANTASTIC ODDS, BUT NONE MORE GALLANTLY THAN OLD "BUCKSHOT" ROBERTS WHO TOSSED HIS INTO THE POT AGAINST 14 OF NEW MEXICO'S TOUGHEST GUNFIGHTERS.

IN THE LINCOLN COUNTY RANGE WAR BETWEEN THE GREAT CATTLE BARONS, SMALL RANCHERS HAD TO TAKE SIDES OR BE TREATED AS ENEMIES. BANDS OF "REGULATORS," HIRED KILLERS AND HARDCASES ATTACHED TO BOTH FACTIONS, RODE THE RANGE TO SEE THEY DID.

ANDREW L. "BUCKSHOT" ROBERTS, A SLIM EX-SOLDIER WITH BOTH ARMS CRIPPLED AND CARRYING A FISTFUL OF LEAD IN HIS BODY HAD A SMALL HOLDING ON RUIDOSA CREEK AND WANTED NO PART OF THE WAR.



ON APRIL 14, 1878, HE WAS SITTING ON THE DOORSTEP OF A HOUSE AT BLAZER'S MILL WHEN DICK BREWER AND 13 REGULATORS APPROACHED HIM. AMONG THEM WERE THE NOTORIOUS BILLY THE KID, JOHN MIDDLETON AND BUCKSHOT'S OWN NEIGHBORS, CHARLIE BOWDREE & JOHN COE.

ROBERTS KNEW WHAT WAS COMING AS HE FACED THEM, RIFLE AT HIP. HE COULDN'T SHOOT FROM THE SHOULDER WITH HIS CRIPPLED ARMS.

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— OLD WEST —



WITH A MUTTERED ORDER TO SURRENDER, BOWDRE'S SIX-GUN SENT A SLUG TEARING THROUGH THE OLD MAN'S MIDDLE. HE STAGGERED BACK AGAINST THE DOORWAY AND BEGAN PUMPING BULLETS GAMELY. LEAD SPATTERING AROUND HIM, HE DROPPED BOWDRE, SPUN MIDDLETON AROUND WITH A SHOT IN THE CHEST, SNIPPED COE'S TRIGGER FINGER CLEAN AS A KNIFE.

THE REGULATORS HURRIEDLY RETIRED TO A RESPECTFUL DISTANCE AND THE DYING MAN BARRICADED HIMSELF IN THE HOUSE. RACKED WITH PAIN AND FEVER, HOLDING HIMSELF TOGETHER WITH ONE HAND AND FIRING WITH THE OTHER HE WINGED A FOURTH AND STOOD THEM OFF FOR HOURS.



DETERMINING TO END THE SORRY AFFAIR, BREWER WORMED HIS WAY TO A LOG PILE 200 YARDS FROM THE HOUSE, AIMED CAREFULLY -- AND MISSED BUCKSHOT BY A HAIR. THE OLD MAN LINED UP HIS SIGHTS AND WAITED. WHEN BREWER'S HEAD APPEARED AGAIN HE DRILLED THE BAD-MAN BETWEEN THE EYES. THE REGULATORS HAD HAD ENOUGH, AND DEPARTED.

ROBERTS DIED NEXT MORNING. HE'D LOST HIS GAMBLE BUT HE'D WRITTEN ONE OF THE MOST STIRRING PAGES IN THE HISTORY OF THE OLD WEST.

SHOOTIN' SIZE

PRECISELY as the marble cherub clock bonged out six-thirty, the girl came into the dining room with her long, free-moving stride, pausing to lean across the checkered table to raise the lampwick as she called, "Good morning, Mother Moffett. Can I help?"

"After three years here you should know you can't!" Ma Moffett sang back with morning's peevishness, and hurried in with breakfast. "Land o' Goshen, Charity, I do wish you'd get a home of your own to worry on before you worry me to death!"

The girl tinted faintly and put her attention on her plate. "Time enough," she murmured, a little disturbed, and a little aloof.

"There's never time enough afterward," the old woman told her. "And you're already twenty-three. What is wrong with Leek Prentiss?"

"Possibly," the girl answered, "he hasn't asked me."

"Fiddlesticks!" Ma scoffed. "He'd ask any time he knew the answer would be yes. The holding back's in you."

The girl stirred her coffee with a self-assured woman's irritation at inward uncertainty and confusion. "There is a lot of ruthless cruelty and harsh arrogance in Leek, I'm finding," she admitted.

"There is anything in a man like Leek that is called for," Mother Moffett stated with absolute certainty. "But not cruelty

for its own sake. He would be very kind and good to a woman."

The girl's eyes sparkled in the cone of smoky yellow lamplight. "Like he is to his little nephew, breaking the boy's heart by not giving him a pony of his own simply because of a fight he lost to the school bully almost a year ago?"

Mother Moffett paused with her cup half way to her mouth. "What is this?"

The girl gave a gesture and leashed her temper. "I thought everybody knew it. He won't let Bojo have a pony of his own and makes him ride whatever's in the corral. He is the only boy in school without a pony with his private brand."

Mother Moffett set down her cup. "Charity, that is the first injustice I've ever heard from you! You know as well as I do that Leek told the boy he could have the Red Colt when he could ride him."

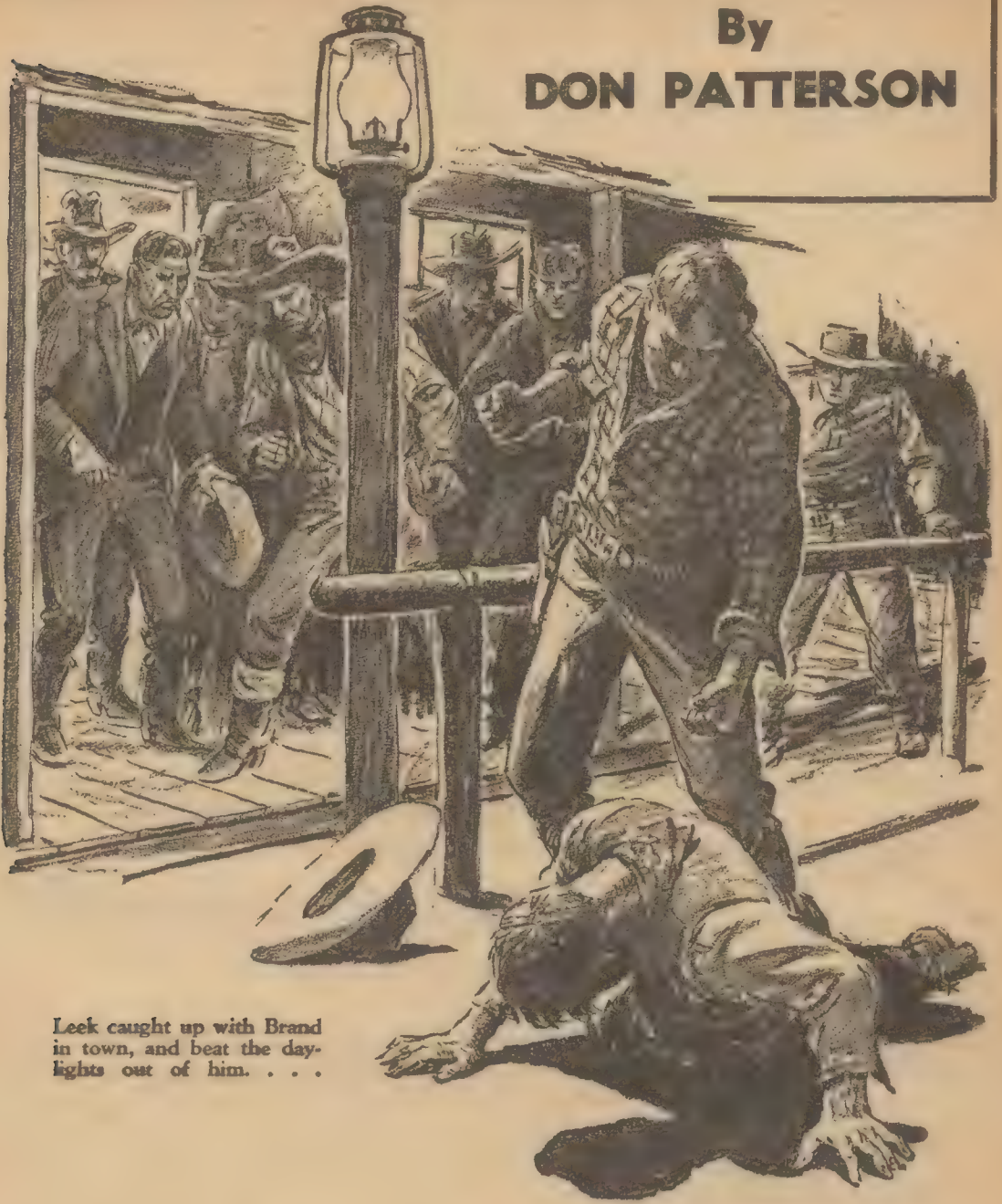
"That colt's a killer!" the girl contended. "Even some of the Prentiss waddies don't dare try it! Leek just made that offer to save face for himself. What it amounts to is punishing the boy for getting licked by Bully Haynes and reflecting on Leek's pride and glory!"

The older woman's hands fluttered with worry. "There is some other reason," she persisted. "Leek isn't like that. He does whatever has to be done the way that's needed, but there is nothing spiteful in him and nothing mean."

"Maybe I'll believe that when I see

*Sometimes a boy has to lose a heap of battles—so that
when he's shootin' size he's going to win 'em!*

By
DON PATTERSON



Leek caught up with Brand in town, and beat the day-lights out of him. . . .

Bojo riding his own pony!" the girl told her sharply, and rising, turned to the mirror to put on her bonnet.

Pop Moffet handed her into the buggy and put the reins into her hands, but delayed spreading the robe across her in the way of a man with something to say that he knows will not be wanted.

"Charity," he allowed weightily, "is

there anything to this gossip that Brand Willis got uppity with you down to the Odd Fellows dance last week?"

"It was nothing," she said. "He'd been drinking."

"He shouldn't have been drinking at a respectable dance!" Pop growled. "You should have told the men folks."

She gave him a chill smile. "To give

you all a good excuse for mayhem? I handled him all right and that's the end of it."

"No, it won't be the end with a big, thick-witted bull like that!" Pop corrected. "He will take it that now you like him, and you have cut anybody else out of stepping in for you."

She leaned forward and took the robe from his hands. "Trouble with all you darned western men," she murmured acidly, "is you're all half savage!"

"And trouble with you durned Yankees," he growled back with privilege, "you're all stubborn about facing life the way it is down here on earth instead of up in Heaven!"

She made a face at him and flurried her whip. The horse jogged out with the sharp clapping sound of a trail with night's chill still hard upon it, but with spring's bursting fulness just waiting for the sun to warm it. Eastward, morning's mists curled up the creases of the shadowed hills into a flushing rose and amber sky. The brisk airs held the hour's first touch of golden warmth and carried the last of night's clutching, haunting scents from the desert and the valleys.

IT HAD been a morning precisely like this that Leek saved her from a fresheting ford, and she thought of it now, and put the thought from her by thinking of the boy.

At eight-fifteen she swung into the school yard where gawky Seth Angler put her horse up, earning fifty cents a month for this chore. The children were all on hand—noisy, rowdy, rough and, mostly, dirty behind the ears. It crossed her mind that Bojo Prentiss had never arrived with a dirty neck or nails or uncared-for boots in spite of being an orphan raised by his rough uncle, and the fact was at odds with her burning opinion of Leek Prentiss. Whatever else his faults and harshnesses, he had taught the boy to care for himself in a manner above the herd.

At eight-twenty-five, when she rang first bell, she saw Bojo still dawdling up in the saddle of the pass, holding back, she knew, from arriving a second early enough to give the boys time to hoot at the rough string scrub he rode this morning. She held the last bell a full half minute to get him in, which he knew; and he scuffed in red of ear and sullenly polite, taking her kindness as additional evidence of the world's throwing his shame back into his face.

He dug an elbow with vicious bad temper into Bully Hayes as they crowded through the door, and almost broke out bawling when Bully's first slap whanged him in the neck. He was alert enough to every smallest jeering look and trick, but she had to call three times for his attention in geography, and then he came up with a miserably wrong answer.

At recess, there were hoots and taunts and the boys bunched up to pick on Bojo, and at sign of the dampness washing across his eyes, the boys really began to get rough. Charity rang the bell a half minute early, and at lunch, she called him to her desk.

He stood with his boots rooted and his head bent down, jabbing out his under lip. She said, kindly enough, "Bojo, you were always high in your class. It would be an awful thing to get left back this year."

She saw the muscles bunch along his sharp, boyish jaw. "What's the difference?" he mumbled hotly. "Everybody expects it anyway!"

She sought to penetrate his seething bitterness; she leaned forward impulsively, putting a sympathetic hand on his small arm. "Bojo," she murmured earnestly, "we were always friends. Tell me the trouble. Is it the horse?"

He looked up, glaring. "What do you know about it?"

She felt the force of his violence with astonishment, a violence holding the im-

pact of a man's. This, at least, she thought grimly, would please Leek! He'd probably say it proved the boy a Prentiss.

"Why," she told him out of her surprise, "nobody had to tell me. You're the only boy this year not riding your own pony." Her mouth tightened. "And I'd like to tell your uncle Leek what I think about it!"

"Leave Leek out of this," the boy grated fiercely. "He's done gimme the best colt on the range any time I want to ride it!"

She smiled understandingly. "But that's a killer you won't want to ride for years yet, Bojo!"

He dropped his head again. The fire went out of him. "I'll ride him any time I'm ready!" he mumbled lamely.

He stood in stubborn silence, resenting her intrusion, rebuffing her proffered interest and friendship. She had no means of reaching him, or making him accept her understanding. It had been bitter enough shame when he'd been beaten by Bully Haynes, but the anguish of his uncle's downright contempt had turned him suspicious and resentful of the world.

She felt his bitterness and his exclusion. She saw nothing further she could do and excused him, wincing at the immediate bombardment of hoots that greeted him out in the yard. There was a flurry of trouble with the pack that began to grow into something sharp and personal and vengeful with Bully Haynes, the trouble breaking sharply with fresher excitement as Brand Willis swung into the yard out of a hard trail run.

She felt a woman's discomfort and doubt of the man grow into alarm with her certainty that Willis was going to mean trouble. He was a bull of a man, in build and ways and temper, and now Pop Moffett's words came back to her, like a sandstorm scraping her assurance.

Brand was grinning and whooping and putting on a first-rate wild riding show for

the kids, and gave them a final thrill by charging his rangy cow pony full tilt at the crowd, haunching the pony as the kids came up yelling and terrified against the shed.

He sat chuckling at the youngsters, pleased with himself and the homage and awe he saw upon their faces. Then he called, "Bully, yore old man likely to be home, or where-at on the spread?"

Bully Haynes strutted out of the crowd hitching at his belt, conscious of being picked out like this, and feeling pretty man-to-man.

"I reckon he's working Stink Valley, Brand," he answered. "Not that I'd go telling just anyone that asked me!"

Brand gave him a favored wink. "Right this end," he grunted. He swung his head toward the school's open windows. "Mebbe that is luck," he added, and drifted his pony over. "Howdy, Miz Charity, if I'd figured to hit here at this time, I'd have brung my lunch along."

She gave him a cool smile and hoped her nervousness did not show through. "I'm afraid there wouldn't be time now even to fix you a cup of coffee."

The rebuff glanced off his thick skin like water. He knew these hard-to-get belles, and it was in his mind, and in his eye, that she had not raised too much of a rumpus at the dance.

"Well," he grunted, "if I'm in luck catching Bully's old man, mebbe I'll get back by in time to ride you home a piece."

Her breath caught and her heart pounded like a banging shutter against her breast. If she eluded him today, he'd be by again; there was no way out of running up against a man whose mind was set.

"Matter of fact," he allowed, "this is like to become a habit. I've got me a heap of business out this way this spring."

She clutched desperately for a woman's defense of putting a man upon his honor. "Brand," she murmured, low and confidentially, "you know what the school

board would say if they heard I was having outside callers here."

He gave her a wise look. "Don't fret on that. When it comes to not looking like I'm around, I'm a Sioux and Ute and Apache rolled into one, Charity."

He chuckled and touched his hat and swung his pony off, leaving the coarse intimacy of his voice shimmering like an alarm through the day's golden warmth. In that country, men had been married before daring to use the intimate form of a girl's Christian name, and no man dropped the "Miss" without definite assumption of long friendship.

SHE was still wracking her brains for a way out of this predicament at three o'clock when she dismissed school, becoming conscious at this last instant of a pale foreboding in Bojo's pinched, set face, and a wicked deviltry in Bully's eyes.

She said instantly, before the boys had crowded out the door, "Bojo, I will be crossing your place for Mrs. Tate's if you would like to ride me through to that trail."

Bojo looked at her uncertainly.

"I'll try not to drive too slow for you," she added.

Bully tossed his head with temper. "You'll be more like to have to wait up for him atop every ridge, Miss Charity!" he taunted, and led the way through the door.

She looked for some sign of relief, some softening toward her, in the smaller boy, but found nothing but added resentment that it had taken a woman's whim to save him from a rough-housing. He was getting near to bursting with the bitterness and shame corroding him. She watched the sullen setness of his face, seething with anger that a grown man would put this cruelty on a boy just for punishment at losing to one bigger.

They angled down a five-mile slope ly-

ing green and blue as a carpet under a sea of rolling, golden haze. The boy saw something she could not, and sent his shrill call yodeling down, and shortly, she saw the weaving plume of dust stringing toward them, and Leek was coming up the grade.

She held her head high and her mouth very prim and straight, but it was impossible not to watch and thrill to that never dull picture of a born horseman riding a queen of a horse with that effortless flowing rhythm of a breeze. He came up fast, but slacking the pony off, she noted, not jerking it to a heart-tearing stop the way Brand did.

He touched his hat and eyed her with faintly mocking humor. "Well, Miss Charity, Pan spread is on the honor list again!"

"She was crossing to Mrs. Tate's," the boy offered.

"Why, that is still a good reason for a visit," Leek grinned.

"I have another, much less good-humored," she told him stiffly.

The boy looked around wide-eyed, judging her afresh and giving her a grudging respect. "Did you cut sign on that big smart jasper waiting, ma'am?"

Leek shot the boy a glance.

"Aw, that big blustering windstorm, Brand Willis," the boy grumbled.

"He bothering you?" Leek asked the girl.

"Not at all!" she told him acidly. "He just happened to be riding back from Haynes's, I guess."

"Brand don't jist happen to do anything," Leek murmured.

"Bojo," she said sharply, "you should not start tales like this! I can handle Mr. Willis quite well without your uncie's help!"

"Yessum," the boy muttered and then dropped his head. "I reckon I can go now?"

Leek nodded. "I'll see Miss Charity

across the graze." He snagged the makings and took his time building a long, full smoke, sitting tall against the horizon, but very quiet.

He put a light to his cigarette and broke the match before he dropped it. "Well," he said with his first smoke, "what crime have I committed?"

She drew a deep breath through compressed lips. "Why," she demanded, "can't Bojo have his own horse off the king spread of this country when he actually owns it himself?"

"He's been given one," Leek said.

She made an irritated gesture. "The Red Colt! What do you want to have the boy do—kill himself? Are you trying to break his spirit like you would a bad dog's, Leek?"

He looked at her directly. "Is it breaking?"

She sniffed with anger. "Every boy in school this year has his own private horse but Bojo. He can't ride the Red Colt and you know it. Why can't he have just some ordinary, good horse like other boys?"

"Because he is not like other boys," he stated.

"The big Prentiss arrogance!" she breathed. "I suppose that's the same reason he should not have lost the fight to Bully?"

"Yes," he nodded. "A man who is going to lord the range cannot afford to lose. Actually, it was not the losing I was mad at. It was that he took the losing—he has done nothing to even up the score."

"What do you want Bojo to do, take a gun and shoot Bully?" she demanded.

He flicked her a look of amusement. "Might save him the trouble later. But I don't think it will be necessary."

"It won't be necessary because he'll have run away in bitterness or be dead of a broken heart!" she flared. "He's only a little boy, Leek. Why can't you treat him like one?"

"He'll be a happier little boy knowing

he's a man," he told her. "This is bad country, Charity. A gun doesn't care for age or size or wealth—it is only the eyes and guts and wits behind a gun that matter."

"What decency and understanding could I expect of you?" she demanded. "All you men want to do is hurt and fight and kill over your darned prides, and now just out of pride, you're treating your own nephew as you wouldn't treat a good steer."

He glanced at Bojo's back, fading into haze toward the home ranch. "Don't look mistreated to me," he said.

She shivered. "What kind of a brute are you? You've already turned him sullen with hate and ashamed of his own shadow so that he doesn't even care what marks he gets in school! What do you think he'll be like when he can't enter the boy's class in the shakedown rodeo because he hasn't his own horse?"

He rubbed out his cigarette between a calloused thumb and forefinger. "A man can only try to do what he can, Charity."

She gave a rasping breath of scorn and slapped her reins upon her pony. They crossed the valley in strained silence and pulled up on the trail to Tate's. "I don't suppose," he speculated, "this would be the best time to ask you to come with me to the rodeo?"

She caught at this chance to return to their old standing; she used the allure of a woman's promise and forgiveness in the expression she turned to him. "Will you let Bojo have a gentler horse of his own?" she demanded.

His expression stilled; he simply shook his head.

A woman's riotous emotions ripped the usual containment of her face. "You're nothing but a brute!" she said, and meant just that.

"I'm sorry you tried to bargain, Charity," he told her.

"I'm sorry I had to!" she answered

tightly, and lifting her head, put her pony along the trail.

SHE spent an hour with the sick Widow Tate and drove back through a sundown filled with bitter memories. She spent a miserable night, and came to breakfast late next morning for the first time in three years. Mother Moffett shot her a keen look and said nothing, but sat down opposite after bringing in her breakfast.

"Seems Leek Prentiss had a run-in with Brand Willis in town last night and whaled the daylights out of him," she allowed.

The girl looked up, expression opening with consternation. Leek was a big man, but Brand was a wild bull. At guns, she would instantly have backed Leek, but with fists—

"Leek sent his warning," the woman went on. "And mebbe Brand isn't tough as he claims, or mebbe he is and was counting on that. Anyway, he had too many drinks by the time Leek corraled him, and they say Leek beat Brand something terrible."

The girl's whole reaction and opinion shifted violently. "Give Leek the chance and he would for the sheer love of it!" she snorted. "Picking on a drunken man!" Anger rose out of the churn of her flow of thoughts. "But I'll let the town know I gave Leek no rights for that!"

"Oh?" Mrs. Moffett murmured with surprise. "That fight wasn't over you, Charity. It was over Brand crossing Leek's grass."

The girl felt the cold sluice of fact and flushed crimson at this giveaway. At school, she found no shred of suspicion that she might be involved on anybody's face except Bojo's.

At lunch time he found her alone and stopped to tell her bluntly, "If you'd done what you should have done in the first place, my uncle wouldn't be having to

make a jackass out of hisself with his fists!"

"Bojo!" she pleaded, almost as if he were grown, "everything doesn't have to be done harsh and brutal!"

"Most things do," he grated shrilly, and pivoted from her. She was close to tears, but behind it was rising a woman's defense of her own thoughts and actions.

The day's hoots and jeers at Bojo broke in from the yard. The boys had him cornered and then they had him running, and she called at them sharply, but it was useless to think she could do this forever.

Brand did not come around; it was three weeks before she saw him again. All that time the rodeo was coming closer, and Bully and his bunch were teaching their horses and showing off every chance they got, and all that time, Bojo's hazing got worse, until he was like a taut bow-string quivering in a high wind.

Then Brand did come around, catching her at the close of school one day and waiting for the children to get along, causing her some annoyance before she managed to get free of him. She knew she had made a mistake at the dance, and from here on, ridicule or insult would only antagonize him.

She didn't know whether it was coincidence or not, but next day she heard of Leek beating Brand again just as before, only this time, plain brute fear had given Brand sharp wits and strength, and before he was beaten, he had come near to mauling Leek. "It's a danged good thing," Pop Moffett considered as he told the story, "that Leek had the good sense to send his warning."

The girl looked at him blankly. "Why? Didn't that give Brand an advantage?"

"Not with his kind," Pop chuckled. "Leek's no fool! It just gave Brand more time to worry and put down drinks!" His eyes sparked with barbed humor. "Danged shame the boys have to fight over crossing grass, I'll say!"

Her brows were knitted as she figured this out, and then a look of self-vindication came into her face. "Then Leek counted on Brand getting drunk?"

Pop shrugged. "When something has to be done, you do it whatever way you can. There is forty pounds difference in Leek and Brand. Personally, I'd have taken me a six-gun."

Bojo's schoolwork grew terrible after that, and finally he didn't show up at all for two whole weeks. When he came in then, he was stiff as barbed wire and limping badly, and had nothing to say, but there was a new fire in his eye and his mouth was grim.

Bully started raw-hiding him right off about the rodeo, but didn't get a second crack out before Bojo turned on him and said on a flat tone, "Shut up! I'll be in that rodeo and I'll lick the bunch of you!"

The girl watched this with consternation from the school window. Bojo wasn't running, he wasn't bawling, he was out there breasting the whole bunch!

"Haw!" Bully jeered, but with a shade of uncertainty. "You can't enter without yore own hoss and you know it!"

"I've got my own hoss," Bojo told him, "the Red Colt. And I'll make every one of you look like nothing."

Bully stared, then threw back his head and filled the yard with whooping, contemptuous laughter. "What good is a hoss you don't even dast ride?"

"I'll ride him," Bojo growled. "I'll ride him here to school tomorrow!"

THE whole school was there early, ready for some excuse, and staring, open-mouthed, when Bojo brought that wild hellion of a colt in. It was but a season short of stallion, a horse king with all the fierce and savage hell and beauty of the whole range in it. Under Bojo's hand it was still spooky, but behaving. She knew then where Bojo had been those two weeks, where he got the crippling,

and the reason behind the self-assurance in him.

It made Bully look pretty second-rate and he stood around glumly, trying to put Bojo back in place but not able to think of a way to do it. He was burning mean at this turning of the tables, and Charity saw the wicked, bullying look begin to twist his face, and she was just for calling the children in when Bojo threw mockery straight in Bully's face.

"You ain't just sore because I've got the best hoss," Bojo told him. "Yo're sore because you wouldn't have the spunk to ride him!"

"Haw! Is that so?" Bully yelled, paling, but feeling the pressure of the crowd. "Any time you can ride a hoss, I can do it with my hands tied!"

"Try it now, then," Bojo taunted.

"There ain't time," Bully said awkwardly.

"Is there time, m'am?" Bojo called.

"Why, I think for a short ride, if Bully wants to," Charity said.

"It'll be short all right!" Bojo chuckled, and the bunch scudded up with excitement until Bully had to try it.

Bully hitched his belt and swung into leather with a boasting crack, and got the fastest, most furious shaking of his life before he slammed down, full length, to the dust. The Red Colt spooked off bucking, but slowed down at the boy's call, and waited for him to come and fetch it. That didn't mean much but loyalty to Charity, but it meant something more to those range-toughened, horse-wise ranch kids. You didn't break and tame a horse like the Red Colt without proving you had guts yorself!

Bully knew that, and he was thinking it as he sobbed for breath, and it never left his mind after he heard Bojo's gritted crack.

"Mebbe you think you just took a licking, Bully, but you ain't taken nothing yet! Just you wait 'till I get this lameness

out of me and I aim to show you what a real licking is!"

She was glad in a way, but if Bojo had been bad at lessons before, he was going to be intolerable now that he was feeling superior.

He got beaten to a pulp all right, but he was still the one who stood torn and bloody and gasping, but grinning with victory while he made Bully crawl and eat mud. She didn't see that fight, and was glad she didn't witness this cruelty Leek had whipped into the boy. But she saw the change in the two boys later, and now she had a fresh worry. There'd be absolutely no peace in school with a full feud running.

Three days later, she saw the astonishing sight of Bully bringing a handmade, horsehair bridle to swap with Bojo, and putting out an offer of friendship and almost feudal loyalty. She saw that, and Bojo's marks began to hit his old high; and instead of arrogance, the sullenness went out of him in nothing flat and left him full of respect and manners. And she saw the intent seriousness of his face when he won his first heat at the rodeo and somehow knew that same seriousness would be in him at examinations.

She had a moment's inward rebellion and then she shrugged and smiled and taking a deep breath, moved up into the stands beside Leek Prentiss. "Mebbe," she murmured, "I judged things wrong."

"Just mebbe?" he asked.

She nodded toward Brand Willis, swaggering along below them with a black truculence in him although he did not look their way. "There was no reason for that and what did you accomplish?"

"Something had to be done," he said, "and I did it the best way I could."

He paused and as Brand came directly below them, called down, "Brand, there some strays of yore's over on Pine Flats."

Brand stopped and glared up. "Seems to me like I had some misunderstandings

about gathering my strays from yore grass!" he growled.

"These are gathered for you," Leek told him. "I don't reckon they'll range for a week yet."

"You had 'em gathered?" Brand barked with amazement and stopped dead in his anger to figure this thing out. It would probably save five or six days' work; and beyond that it was an act of downright friendliness. "How about that misunderstanding?"

"Why, I figure that's clear and settled and we're neighbors again," Leek grunted, "now that we've got things straight."

Brand's eyes switched to the girl, flamed once with jealousy, then anger gutted out of them.

He grinned and then he looked back at Leek. "Why didn't you let on you were planning that grass for summer graze?" he asked. "Now that I know, there ain't no reason for no more misunderstanding. I'll be over for them strays, Leek."

The girl looked a little shamed and baffled. "I guess I'll have to learn to do things the hard way in the West."

"No, the easy way," Leek laughed. "Like just saying yes when I ask you along about sundown."

She colored and felt a little choked and her eyes were very soft as they fell on Bojo and his self-appointed lieutenant, Bully, grooming the Red Colt. "He's very happy with that horse, Leek," she murmured. "When did you tell him he could have it, exactly?"

"About a week after he got licked by Bully," Leek told her. "I had it cut out for him anyway, but he wasn't tough enough to handle it. That licking and hazing toughened him to break the kind of a colt he ought to ride, and then he was tough enough to give the licking back."

"A horse for Bojo!" she laughed. "Mebbe I'll do it yore Western way and not wait for sundown, Leek. Right now, I'll jist say yes."

BADLANDS BUSTER

By **RAYMOND
S. SPEARS**

*Seventh of
Nine Parts*



From the Rio Grande to
the Pecos he had left
bitter enemies. . . .

*At gunpoint, trapped, Siringo
was to learn a range dick's
last grim lesson: There's only
one sure way to stop a killer
—and that's to be a more
deadly one yourself!*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Accounts Settled

H IRED gunmen were to kill Siringo. It seems that Siringo had been riding through the country "on the quiet," doing detective work alone. This was during 1880, through the autumn, and the war against the gang of Billy the Kid was in full course. Only when the accounts

of the closing in on the outlaws are compared with Siringo's own accounts is it clear that Siringo was acting as a range detective. His name does not appear in the several posses who hunted Billy the Kid down. Nevertheless, he was there—under an alias, apparently.

Siringo spent weeks with Billy the Kid, who was at Tascosa with members of his gang. Now, down in Lincoln County, after the bushwhackers shot at him, Siringo ransacked the country in search of evidence to be presented in court against the stolen beef fence. The fact that the outfits had been losing beef stolen down the winter wind drives should be emphasized. Pat Garrett had been elected sheriff for the express purpose of breaking up the gang and either killing or legally hanging Billy the Kid. Garret rode into White Oaks apparently on the quiet, to join the posses of Siringo and of other outfits.

Pretending to be killing time at White Oaks, putting on a big celebration over Christmas, 1880, and New Year's, 1881, Siringo was a riding detective. On the two-week trip spying on the Coghlan outfit—and escaping the bushwhackers—he learned that the case simply had to go to battle or to court.

The law was invoked, and this instantly gave the victims of wholesale theft of cattle, whatever their own shortcomings, the immense advantage of legality. Siringo added his sly, mocking humor to the story of the marshaling of the forces of the law by telling the following:

Bob Roberson and I kept the neighbors around our shack supplied with fresh beef. A large steer would be dressed and hung up in a tree nearby. The neighbors would help themselves to this stolen beef—so that we had to butcher a fresh one quite often. One of these beef-eating neighbors, William C. McDonald, then a young surveyor, was the first governor of the state of New Mexico. He made an excellent governor. In Texas it was the custom to kill anyone's animals for beef.

Sheriff Pat Garret, acting against the

desperadoes, borrowed men from the cattle-owners' posses; Siringo's job was to hit the buyers of cattle, fences where whole herds of live stock were bought cheap but for cash. The glamor of the search for and capture of Billy the Kid overshadows the difficult undercover search for witnesses and for proofs of the violations of crooked ranchers and their political allies. The attempt to assassinate Charlie Siringo showed clearly the desperate understanding by forces trying to maintain their respectability of reputation and their words as good as bonds; arrest and trial meant "disgrace."

There were men of honor of this kind prevailing throughout the big pasture after the Civil War. In their beginnings they kept straight among themselves, according to the business standards of the period. Many held sway against the Indians, against the crooked officials, against the cattle men who regarded crooked deals as proof of their acumen. The Lincoln County war was a combat among conditions in which the cheaters had the advantage for a long time. Honest leaders were victimized by men whose standards were criminal.

Billy the Kid and other killers were thieves hired out to the ranchers, sometimes to do honest cowboy work and sometimes to raid other men's outfits. To defend themselves and their properties, reputable ranchers and business men felt obliged to hire gunmen. In Lincoln, merchants fought merchants and sheriffs were shot down, and after a while General Lew Wallace—author of *Ben Hur*—offered the gunmen pardons if they would surrender their guns to him and sign treaties of peace with the government, with himself as territorial governor.

Outlaws searched around for guns to surrender; they found rusty old revolvers and broken-down repeaters, polished them with fine sand and made them shiny and greasy. They "surrendered," got their

pardons and returned, celebrating, to their settlements and camps. And then, needing money, they hired out as gunmen, because a killer was worth seventy-five dollars more or less a month compared to twenty or thirty dollars paid to mere cowboys. All the big outfits wanted was their own individuality, uncontaminated by appeal to law, authority, and honest judgments. They all wanted their own way.

Killings went on as usual, promiscuously. Two cowboys fought a duel in Bill Hudgins's liquor joint. Joe Fowler, who had killed a score of men, more or less, rushed in and killed the cowboy who had been wounded, and then organized a band of vigilantes who chased, caught and lynched the other cowboy. Afterward Fowler himself was lynched in Socorro. He had cut one of his own riders to death, blasted Jim Greathouse with a shotgun—in bed and asleep; and word came that Billy the Kid had been captured by Sheriff Pat Garret and a posse over at Fort Sumner, where Billy had one of his sweethearts. Tom O'Phalliard and Charlie Bowdre, of the Kid's gang, had been killed. Billy the Kid had been cornered in a little stone cabin, his horse killed, his companions starved and frozen out, and Billy captured.

Oddly enough, the detective work of Charlie Siringo in obtaining information about the gang, his marshaling the facts with which to take the big rancher to court on the charge of receiving cattle he had bargained to take from Billy the Kid, is hardly mentioned. Pat Garret, in his story of Billy the Kid, written by Ash Upson, in 1882, (MacMillan Co. reprint, 1927) says:

Before we reached Hay's ranch, I heard that Frank Stewart, agent for cattle owners on the Canadian River, was at or near Anton Chico with a large party, and was hotly on the trail of The Kid and his band with the determination not merely to recover the stolen stock but also to capture the thieves.

FRANK STEWART figures through all the stories of the wind-up of Billy the Kid, but Charlie Siringo seems never to have claimed the obvious fact that he was himself Frank Stewart. The effort to have him bushwhacked is given clearly enough; it was an attempt to head off his efforts to bring in the receiver of stolen goods—as well as exterminate the mere rustlers and hired outlaws—and there is in the whole story of Billy the Kid's killing by Pat Garret a remarkable slant on Siringo's self-effacement, as if he would cover up the war among the ranchers by letting the battles and skirmishes among the gunmen be exploited. In Siringo's own story of Billy the Kid he quotes James H. East, of Garret's posse that closed in on the gang:

Our horses were left with Frank Stewart and some of the other boys under guard, while Garret took Lee Hall, Tom Emory, and myself with him.

Emerson Hough in his *Story of the Outlaw* reported (1907):

Frank Stewart, a cattle detective, with a party of several men, was also in from the Canadian country looking for the kid and his gang for thefts over to the east of Lincoln County, across the lines of Texas and the Neutral Strip (No Man's Land.)

The omission of Siringo's name and his appearance as "Frank Stewart" is, if surmise is correct, remarkable. Siringo himself, in his first "A Texas Cowboy," has this to say:

The cattlemen along the Canadian River had hired a fellow by the name of Frank Stuart to keep a lookout for stolen cattle in New Mexico; and along in the summer he came to the Panhandle and notified the different cattlemen who had him employed that "Billy the Kid" and his gang were making a regular business of stealing Panhandle cattle and selling them to an old fellow named Pat Cohglen who had a large ranch on Three Rivers, close to Ft. Stanton.

The outfits then made up a crowd between them, and went with Stuart, giving him orders to go right to the Cohglen ranch and take all the cattle found there, in their

brands. But Mr. Stuart failed to go nearer than forty miles from where the cattle were reported to be. He claimed that Coghlan, who had a bloodthirsty crowd with him, sent him word that if he got the cattle he would have to take some hot lead.

This made Moore mad, so he determined to rig up an outfit of his own and sent them over after the cattle. My outfit consisted of a chuck wagon, with four good mules to pull it, a cook and five picked men, named as follows: James East, Lee Hall, Lon Chambers, Cal Pope, and last but not by any means least, Big Foot Wallace (Frank Clifford).

Whether Siringo went by the name of Stewart or Stuart he was working undercover, for he states:

I went under an assumed name and told them I was on the dodge for a crime committed in southern Texas. I found out all about their future plans from one of the gang by the name of Johnson, who seemed to be more talkative than the rest.

One morning while Johnson and I were eating breakfast at a restaurant a man sat down at the same table and, recognizing me, called me by name. He then continued although I winked at him several times to keep still. "So you fellows succeeded in capturing Billy the Kid, did you?"

Johnson gave a savage glance at me. I kept my hand near my Colts .45 for I expected him to make a break. He finally walked out. This man who had so suddenly burst our friendship was a friend of Frank Stuart's and had met me in Las Vegas. So I struck back to White Oaks. . . .

Siringo wrote to Moore of the LX that he had ample evidence to prosecute the cattle fence, and U. S. Deputy Marshal John Poe was sent to Tombstone, Arizona, to arrange the arrest of Coghlan. Billy the Kid had been caught, tried and sentenced to be hanged. Pat Garret, sheriff, left the undersized murderer in Lincoln while he went to buy timber for the gallows. The Kid killed both his guards and escaped—so the hunt for him began all over again.

Siringo rode to Fort Sumner, helping in the hunt. He went to two Mexican fandangos on successive nights, and as usual, found a girl. She wasn't kind. She refused to let him accompany her home to the big Maxwell House. Several months

later, when Siringo danced with her again, she explained that the reason she dismissed his company was that the fugitive Billy the Kid was waiting at the hotel—and she had favored Siringo with his life. The outlaw would have shot him from the dark the way Garret later killed Billy the Kid in a room in the same building.

Under \$500 bond to appear as witness in the Coghlan case, Siringo and a small crew gathered 2500 head of cattle; and when Poe, who was handling the case as deputy marshal, gave the word, they had to wait in hiding, partly to keep clear of gunmen, partly to surprise the defendant who tried to put off trial—periods of intense activity were alternated with weeks or months of loafing around. And in those waits, the riders sang their heads off, learned to tell stories, flirted with the dark-skinned women, established friendships or enmities, practiced shooting, fast draw and down in the sights.

Sheriff Garret waited for word that Billy the Kid was around, having the outlaw's range covered by observers, and especially at Fort Sumner his confidential watcher kept tabs on Dulcinea del Toboso, the Kid's sweetheart. Garret received the tip-off on July 13, 1881.

Garret and his small, well-picked posse slipped into the settlement. Two men waited outside; Garret went into Pete Maxwell's bedroom, crouching by the man's bed, and whispered his question.

Then Billy the Kid came in.

"*Quien es?*" he exclaimed in the usual tongue of the place.

Pat recognized him by his shape in the doorway. Moonlight was shining through a window in the 'dobe wall. In that beam of light, Pat got him, shooting upward and as the outlaw pitched down, shooting again. Only a kill—law or outlaw—was feasible. Old friends, each in his way famed, met across the barrier and the desperado died.

(To be continued.)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 97)

HOWDY, pardner! Here's your chance to show whether you're top-hand material . . . or a milk-toast cowboy. In other words, how much do you know about the West. Below are twenty questions about cowpokes and the range in general. If you can answer eighteen or more of them correctly, then you're definitely in the old-timer class. Answer sixteen, and you're good. But answer fifteen or fewer . . . and you're crowding into the milk-toast cowpoke class. Good luck!

1. What is a "rafter brand"?
2. What is the meaning of the Western expression "*quien sabe*"?
3. If a cowpuncher acquaintance of yours told you he was "rodding the spread," which of the following would he mean he was doing? Leaving the ranch where he had formerly been riding? Acting as boss of the outfit? Serving as fence rider for a ranch?
4. True or false? A "rim fire" (saddle) is also known as a "Spanish rig."
5. What kind of a horse is a "pile driver"?
6. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "pegging"?
7. If the boss of the ranch where you were working sent you out for some "open-shop pants," which of the following would you return with? A pair of chaps? A pair of "Sunday" pants? A type of Western trousers worn primarily by outlaws?
8. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "on tick"?
9. "Moros" is a rangeland expression used in reference to a horse of what color?
10. True or false? A "mockey" is a wild mare.
11. In the slangage of the true Westerner, what is the meaning of the term, "lone ranger"?
12. True or false? A "*llano*" is a heavily wooded, mountainous territory.
13. If the ranch boss sent a tenderfoot out to bring in a "hooter," which of the following should the greenhorn try to obtain? An owl? A wowser? A shotgun?
14. "Hooks" is a Western slang expression for what items?
15. What is a "grubber," and why is it so called?
16. True or false? The Western slang expression, "grave patch," means "cemetery."
17. True or false? A "filly" is a young female horse.
18. When a bucking horse is said to be "fence worming," how is he bucking?
19. True or false? "Cutter" is a cowpoke slang term for pistol.
20. When a cowpoke is urged to "Curry him out!" what does he do to the horse he is riding?

Some men dig for gold—some just find their graves. And once in a while a gent comes along who's greedy enough to stake a claim to both!

DIG MY GRAVE DEEP

COGGINS could feel the wild sweat soaking him, and against the sweat the cold darkness of the mine shaft sent a shiver along his spine. It didn't do to think too much at a time like this, he told himself. Just keep moving, that was it. Down into the bowels of the earth; into the Stygian darkness and musky, earthy smells of the old mine.

He staggered under the weight of old Ming on his shoulder. The Chinese had always looked small, like a wrinkled, yellow doll; but he was heavy now. Maybe it was because Coggins was trying to move so fast. Maybe it was just because old Ming was dying. Coggins had heard once that dying and dead men always feel heavier than live ones.

He was gasping, like an animal in terror. The terror was there, yes, Coggins thought, like cold worms crawling through his belly, but he could control it. There was just a lack of air in the old mine, that was all. If he could only have one, deep lungful of fresh, decent-smelling air. . . .

Coggins stumbled deeper into the mine. He felt as if he were miles deep in the cold, dark earth. He could hear water dripping slowly somewhere ahead, and a rat skittering across his path. The world above, the world of sunshine and growing green things seemed a thousand years in his past, even though it had been only moments since he'd heard the distant echo

of the shots and had gone to mouth of the shaft.

Ming had almost stumbled into his arms, gasping, "They lob us, lob us of all the gold!"

Now with Ming's dying weight on his shoulders, Coggins felt bitterness bubbling in him. In a way, it wasn't so bad for Ming. Ming had lived out his life, and had known from that last visit to the doctor that his days were numbered. The bullet rattling around in old Ming just put a definite date on his death, and in that sense made it easier for him. Coggins had seen what the waiting under the shadow of death had done to him. Even Ming's opaque eyes hadn't been able to conceal it entirely.

That was one way of looking at it, Coggins thought. But if you looked at it another way, dying was a terrible thing for Ming. Ming had an ambition, which he had often confided to Coggins. It was to bring Ling Toy, Ming's grandson, across the wide green sea to this new land of promise. The land had offered Ming grinding work, as a chuckwagon cook, then as a member of a railroad gang as the roads pushed ever westward over the towering mountains; even working the mine here, Ming had had to grub like a gopher.

But America meant something special to Ming; something that a mind different from his stoical, Oriental mind could

By TALMAGE POWELL



The light grew brighter and brighter
as the two came forward. . . .

never fully understand. Coggins never tried to understand completely, but he knew that Ming had this dream for Ling Toy, and for Ling Toy's children and children's children. Generations later it would be Ming who had started it all; by the act he would become an Honorable Ancestor, a status more important to Ming than life itself; through Ling Toy's generations, something of Ming would remain in the land, alive and strong, and those generations would pay him respect in their memories because he had been strong and keen enough to make this

breathtaking land of green valleys and mountains possible for them.

Under Ming's weight, Coggins muttered soft, almost hysterical sounds in his throat. There was heartbreak and frustration in him at this shattering of Ming's dream, in the mine no one but the old yellow man and Coggins had been willing to work.

Why didn't the old Chinaman say something? As if in answer to Coggins's thought, Ming made a sound, a cough that showed that the bullet was in the lungs. There wasn't a chance in hell for Ming;

Coggins knew it and sensed that Ming knew it too.

Coggins was stooped now, almost having to crawl in the low shaft with the old man. His heart was hammering against the lack of oxygen. Something smashed against his shoulder, almost knocking him off balance. He had to pause an instant, gulp for breath.

"Coggins?" Ming whispered, and the word brought another cough tearing out of him.

"It's all right," Coggins said. "An old timber down, but not a cave-in."

Ming coughed again, and like an echo on the heels of the cough, Coggins's listening ears caught sounds for back toward the mine mouth. It took only a moment for the sounds to have meaning, and standing there in the darkness Coggins felt his flesh go to gooseflesh and his throat go alum-dry. They were following him in. They had searched the cabin for the gold, and now, enraged and still empty-handed, they were coming into the mine. They would get the old yaller Chinese and his partner and burn the location of the dust out of them with the tip of a hot knife blade.

C OGGINS wondered how much time he had before they overtook him. His heart was numb and cold, but a part of his mind was crystal clear. There were two of them; he had seen that from the mine entrance when Ming had fled in. They were Sorrel Sidel and Edo Clane, and they were drunk. They had got together, swigged the crazing yellow liquor in town, and had decided to go out and get their hands on the dust that rumor credited the old Chinese and his partner with having. Here in the lawless Territory men like Sidel and Clane did things that way; liquor, empty pockets, an itch in their palms, and a prize to be taken. Those

were ingredients enough for minds like Sidel's and Clane's.

As he moved, Coggins tried to tell himself that he was exaggerating. Sorrel Sidel and Clane would never venture this far into the mine. But he knew that he was fooling himself. Perhaps the wanton shooting of Ming had been reactive, a liquored-up impulse of the instant to keep the old man from fleeing into the mouth of the mine shaft; but now that they had gone this far, now that the shooting was done, Sidel and Clane would go all the way.

The cough racked Ming again; and this time the spasm was so fierce the yellow fingers dug into Coggins's back.

Coggins listened again. Back in the distance of the shaft, a voice shouted, echoing, rolling down the shaft. They had heard old Ming's cough. They were coming forward faster now, like dogs smelling blood. Sidel and Clane knew the old Chinaman was unarmed, and they would guess that Coggins was too. They had seen Coggins for that brief moment at the shaft's mouth. They would guess he had been working, and they weren't too drunk to figure that Coggins didn't wear a gun when he was working.

Misery beat in Coggins's heart. He had never figured his life to amount to anything much; but now he knew, in these seconds before death came swooping out of the dank darkness behind him, what a man's life was worth. He knew that every cell in his body cried out against dying. For an instant a cauldron of agonized frustration erupted in him at dying like this, empty-handed and helpless, deep in a cold, dark, ready-made tomb.

He staggered to a stop, blowing like a horse that has run a great distance. He forced himself to remain calm. He could faintly hear Sidel and Clane coming down the shaft. He pictured a chart of the mine in his mind, trying to remember. The blind shaft at the last bend was the one

with the cave-in—or was it? Was it the next minor shaft, the one that angled off from the main shaft just ahead the clear one? Coggins was sure that it was. For an instant his spirits lifted. He'd turn into the small shaft. He had to have a place to lay Ming down. He would find a weapon of some kind, an old pickhead, anything...

But of what use would a pickhead be against two men with guns?

Ming coughed again. Coggins cursed under his breath and moved on down the shaft.

He searched with his free hand along the shaft wall, fingers touching the ragged strata of rock and clay-like dirt. The main vein had played out here years ago, and the big Eastern corporation that owned the mine had closed it up. After Ming and Coggins came, there was clearing out to do, cave-ins to move, timbers to brace. They had gambled that they could still take gold from this earth. Ming had put up the money, and Coggins had furnished half the brains and a strong back. They had labored like ants through all the old diggings, before hitting the new, small vein that had been paying off. And laboring through the shafts, Coggins had learned every twisting and turning of them.

But now his teeth went on edge and he wondered if the chart he'd drawn in his mind was as accurate as he'd thought. He'd missed the small side shaft, and he couldn't keep to the main shaft much longer. Sidel and Clane were getting too close behind.

Then Coggins's searching hand touched empty air. He jerked to a stop. Bending low, he pushed his way into the small shaft that angled off the main one. Squatting low, Coggins still couldn't keep Ming from brushing against the roof of the burrow. The movement brought down a small shower of dirt crumbs. The Eastern corporation had made several tappings

like this off the main shaft when the mine had started playing out.

The burrow formed an ell. Coggins wriggled around it and laid old Ming out in the darkness.

"If they go on down the main shaft, they might by-pass us here," Coggins said.

Ming said nothing.

Coggins listened. Distantly, he could hear sounds coming on down the shaft. He couldn't risk a light, but his fingers searched blindly until he had Ming turned a trifle and felt the blood on Ming's back. It was a bright, red fountain, hot against his fingers, and he pulled them away, letting Ming settle back slowly.

"I'm very sorry, Coggins," Ming whispered. "Now they follow—and Ming has brought death to you, my trusted friend."

Coggins slouched on his haunches and said nothing. He had never been a man of many words, and there were no words that would reply to the bitter heartbreak in the old man's voice. Ming had brought danger to a friend. Better that he should have gone to his ancestors a thousand times and with great pain each time than to have done that to a friend.

"Ming die with this thing in his heart!"

"No," said Coggins, "you mustn't feel that way. You didn't figure they'd start shooting when you made the break. You didn't figure them to follow you in. Anyhow, it was your only hope, Ming. Any man would have been a fool not to try to make the mine shaft."

"Your words prove your manhood," Ming said in his husking whisper, trying to fight a bubbling, tearing cough back, "which only makes Ming sadder."

Coggins sensed that Ming was weeping. It was a shocking, strange thing to think of those never-blinking almond eyes filling with tears. Even through the fear that was washing through him like dirty, cold water, Coggins felt a great pity for the man, and he was glad the darkness

hid Ming's tortured eyes from his gaze.

"I would like to touch my queue before I die, Coggins."

C OGGINS eased Ming up, pulled the long braid of hair from under Ming's shoulder, and draped it down across Ming's chest. He felt Ming's fingers brush his and the old, yellowed talons touched the queue. It was the one mark of old China still upon Ming. He might wear blue jeans and a shirt and boots, but that queue would be rolled under his flat-browed Stetson. He claimed it was the most wonderful queue in the world. Coggins could believe that, for the queue was long and glistening-black and belied Ming's age. To the old Chinese it was a wonderful queue because it was the queue of the Mings.

"I have disgraced this queue, bringing danger to you, Coggins." Ming fought a cough. "And now I die here. I have only one hope left—that you, friend dear as a son, will somehow get out. The gold is still all hidden under the cabin. You get out, Coggins, take Ming's gold, send Ling Toy..." Ming fell back gasping, fighting a cough, and when he touched the old man's brow, Coggins felt the quickly rising fever.

"If I get out, Ming, I'll send your gold to Ling Toy."

"Ming is happy."

The light grew. He could hear their voices now, Sidel's muttering, and Clane's short replies.

"Hell," Clane said. "Might take two or three days. They both might even croak in here, starving rather than facin' us. And somebody might happen along. Can't afford it. Let's git 'em now! They got to be in the belly of this mountain."

Then suddenly the light was waning.

Coggins tried to swallow; he watched the lantern glow grow dim, and listened to Sidel's and Clane's footsteps fading as they went on deeper down the shaft.

The earth was composed of silence and blackness again. Coggins turned wriggled back up to Ming.

His hands went forward, searching, jerked to a stop; and then he drew his hands slowly from Ming. He was glad the darkness hid the sight before him. All the while he had known with dread certainty that Ming's racking cough would lead Sidel and Clane to them. But Ming had known it too, and Ming had smothered the cough, given his friend the insurance of silence, and the silence had saved Coggins's life.

Coggins pressed against the wall of the burrow, his fingers still twitching from the feel of Ming's queue embedded and knotted with the last of Ming's strength in the yellow skin of Ming's throat.

Ming had lifted the disgrace from his queue, Coggins thought; and he sat shaken by things he would never be able to tell any man.

The man who turned and crawled out of the burrow was different from the man who had crawled in. He reached the main shaft, moving in silence on his toes. Caution slowed him down, but finally, through the inky blackness, he saw a pale light ahead. It brought a hammering to his heart, that light, the light of day. Then he was out in it, feeling the glory of the sun on his flesh, the expansion of fresh air in his lungs. He moved across the rocky side of the mountain.

Coggins jerked the cabin door open. A Winchester hung on pegs against the sagging wall. He took the gun down, jacked a cartridge into the chamber, and moved to the window of the shack.

The window faced the mine entrance. Coggins flung it open and rested the Winchester on the window sill. His cheek was firm against the stock, and eyes like ice sighted along the barrel of the gun as Coggins waited in the bright light of day for the appearance of two faces in the mine's yawning mouth.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 91)



1. A "rafter brand" is a brand with an inverted "V" over the top of it.

2. The Western expression, "quien sabe" means "Who knows." Actually, the term has come more to mean something like "I don't know anything about it." The term is most widely used in the Southwest.

3. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he was "rodding the spread," he would mean he was acting as boss of the outfit.

4. True. A rim fire (saddle) is also known as a Spanish rig.

5. A "pile driver" is a horse that fights stiff-legged when bucking. Often such a horse will hunch his back up, in addition. Needless to mention, such a ride is seldom comfortable.

6. "Pegging" means driving the horn of a steer into the ground to help hold it down.

7. If the ranch boss sent you for "open-shop pants," you should return with a pair of chaps.

8. The term, "on tick," means to buy on credit.

9. "Moros" is a rangeland term used in reference to a horse of a bluish color.

10. True. A "mockey" is a wild mare.

11. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, the term, "lone ranger" has a meaning different from the one associated with it in other parts of the country. A lone ranger, to the true Westerner, is simply an unmarried cowpoke.

12. False. A "llano" is a flat, sparsely wooded territory—not a heavily wooded, mountainous one.

13. If the ranch boss sent a tenderfoot out for a "hooter," the latter should do his best to bring in an owl.

14. "Hooks" is a Western slang expression for "spurs."

15. A "grubber" is an animal that gnaws around the roots of loco weed. It is so called, because it "grubs" in this fashion.

16. True. The Western slang expression "grave patch" means cemetery. Needless to mention, this is only one of many terms which the cowpoke through the years has applied to the burying ground.

17. True. A "filly" is a young female horse.

18. A bucking horse is said to be "fence worming" when he bucks in a peculiar zig-zag fashion. The term probably came into being because a horse which bucks in this fashion, bucks along the lines of an old fashioned rail fence.

19. True. "Cutter" is a cowpoke slang term for pistol. The word "cutter" has various other meanings throughout the West, also. But it definitely is used in reference to pistols, too.

20. When a cowpoke is urged to "curry out" the horse he is riding, he rakes the animal's sides with his spurs.

GUNS OF THE



He jerked his gun and fired again before McKelvy got his gun up. . . .

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

ED McKELVY stooped and picked up the broken rowel. Was a time, he reflected wryly, when he would have been more careful not to let the town see him in such an act, but age had a way of insulating a man against the amused jibes of his neighbors. Now McKelvy accepted their hazing as matter of factly as he accepted each day's sun.

Charley Higgs, who occupied the lazy bench in front of Canaday's feed store,

watched McKelvy with a grin stretching his long mouth.

"Find yourself a good piece of junk?"

"Looks likely," McKelvy said. He was a small thin man whose shoulders had been permanently curved by years of bending over the trays of photographic chemicals in his studio darkroom. He wore no hat and a sparse saddle of gray-ing roan hair lay thinly across his balding head.

HUECO KID

A better man's guns on his hips, Ed McKelvy met his final bullet reckoning, knowing that it was better to have fought—and died—than never to clear leather at all!

He rocked on his heels, examining the broken spur rowel speculatively. "Looks mighty likely, Charley. It'd be a shame to let a thing like this go to waste."

Charley Higgs raised his head and laughed. "You'd give nightmares to a packrat, the way you're always collecting odds and ends of junk. What could you ever use that thing for?"

McKelvy wiped dust from the spur wheel. "Don't rightly know yet." He gnawed a corner from the tobacco plug he rummaged out of his pocket. "Might prop up my camera sometime when I want to make an angle picture. Or it'd do for a paperweight. Never can tell when a thing like this will come in handy, Charley."

He walked on.

Looking back, he could remember the time when he would have been offended by any man's ribbing, but those days were gone along with most of his hair. Now he felt a kind of warm pleasure when some man bantered him because of his habit of collecting such useless items as the broken spur rowel. It was his nature to be acquisitive. An old magazine was something to be read sometime in the future. A length of rope, a bent hondo, or a pair of worn-out chaps which some rider had cast aside—any or all of them would find their way into Ed McKelvy's studio. Whether or not he ever used them made no difference. It was the fact that he had them that mattered, for it

crossed some stubborn grain deep in him to see any object cast aside which might someday be useful.

He walked on past Canaday's feed store and angled into the street toward the courthouse square. From the corner of his eye he saw Jess Liggett watching him from the shadows under the board awning of Luke Doreen's Spanish Dollar Saloon.

A thought cut roughly into McKelvy's mind—*This time Doreen won't take it so easy.*

He could remember the photograph he had tacked to the public bulletin board last week. It had been a picture of old Bill Crothers drugged by Luke Doreen's barman, beaten by Doreen's saloon toughs, and robbed of the money he had received from the sale of his spring calf crop.

McKelvy's caption under the photograph had been terse and bitter.

All Bill Crothers wanted when he went into Luke Doreen's Spanish Dollar was a drink. This is what he got. Look at the picture of an old man robbed and beaten to the very edge of his life and ask yourself: *Does Herrodsburg have room for saloonkeepers like Luke Doreen?*

McKelvy remembered. Doreen had handed out his first warning then. There would be no second.

The sun was hot on McKelvy's back, and the south breeze brought him the faintly ammoniac odor of cattle in the shipping pens at the far edge of town. He came to the bulletin board and stopped.

Half turning, he saw Jess Liggett push savagely away from the saloon wall and start toward him. Liggett hesitated briefly, then wheeled sharply and tramped back into the saloon. McKelvy smiled grimly. One of Doreen's guntoughs going in to report.

He took the photograph he had printed last night out from under his arm. He pulled the thumbtacks out of the bulletin board, and pinned the photograph into place. He stepped back, looking bitterly at the product of his camera.

Tommy Dall had been a good kid. A little wild perhaps, but no more so than any other puncher who worked the valley ranges. Tommy was a kid who had worked too hard and had wanted to play too hard. He had imagined too much of his skill with cards and his mistake had been made in testing his skill at Luke Doreen's poker table.

The caption under the photograph of Tommy Dall's bullet-torn body was in the black lettering of McKelvy's grease pencil. He could remember the words:

"How much money is a man's life worth? A thousand dollars? Five hundred dollars? One hundred? There was only sixty-three dollars in the pot when young Tommy Dall sat in his poker game with Luke Doreen last Saturday night. Sixty-three dollars that meant Tommy's savings after four months of hard work. But apparently the meager sum of money meant more than that to Luke Doreen, for it was Doreen who finally got it. All Tommy Dall got out of that game was the bullet that tore the life out of his heart. Dying, Tommy had whispered, 'That black ace—Doreen slipped it out of his sleeve.' *How long must Herrodsburg be infected with gamblers like Luke Doreen?*"

Sheriff Ben Seiffert drifted up while Ed McKelvy stood in front of the bulletin board. A small rotund man with dry lips and a thin whip of hair circling under the brim of his hat, Seiffert's pale

eyes sought out the photograph and the caption under it. He ran the tip of his tongue across his lips and shook his head faintly.

"This is bad business, Ed. You've taken a long step this time."

"What I'm wondering," Ed McKelvy said, "is if there is anyone in this town with the nerve to take the step with me."

The sheriff flushed, and looked uneasily away. "That's no way to talk about your friends, Ed."

"How is a man supposed to talk when another one of his friends has been murdered? Tommy Dall was my friend. He used to drop by once in a while, and we'd play checkers in the studio. I liked him. Tommy's dead now. What am I supposed to say about that?"

Ben Seiffert's gaze drifted restlessly along the street. He brought his eyes around to Ed McKelvy, and then looked down at his polished boots. "It was just another saloon fight." His tone was low and worried. "That's all it was, Ed."

McKelvy bent his balding head. "Who are you talking to, Ben—me, or yourself?"

The flush deepened in Ben Seiffert's face. "You've got no proof that Doreen cheated in that game."

"You've got no proof that he didn't," McKelvy answered. "It was Tommy Dall who died, not Doreen. It was Dall who used his last breath to tell about Doreen slipping that ace of spades out of his sleeve."

Ben Seiffert started to speak, but his voice cracked. He cleared his throat, trying to put weight behind his words. "A kid like Tommy would get excited in a game. He might think he saw something crooked, when he didn't, really."

Ed McKelvy nodded. "Maybe. But you don't believe that, Ben. You're trying to make yourself believe it, but you don't."

He watched Seiffert rub moisture from

the palms of his hands. He said softly, "It was Tommy Dall that was killed last Saturday. Your boy Phil has been hanging around Doreen's place a lot lately. Maybe Phil will be the next to die."

McKelvy turned and walked away, leaving the sheriff with that thought. He looked toward Doreen's Spanish Dollar, but the plank walk fronting the saloon was empty. He went on past the place, turned in at Will McAult's general store, and ordered his day's ration of cigars.

McAULT was a lank Scot with a gray face that never saw enough of the sun, and shoulders that had been bent by his daily grind of work behind the counter.

The store owner said, "You sure you're doing the right thing, stirring up this trouble with Luke Doreen? I just saw you tack up another of your pictures over there."

Ed McKelvy raised his eyes. "Do you figure I'm doing the wrong thing, Will?"

McAult shrugged and looked uncomfortably away. "No profit in wrapping yourself up in other folks' fights, Ed, or in stirring up trouble for yourself."

McKelvy nodded, scratching a match into life. He brought the flame up to his cigar. "No profit at all, Will. You tell that to your daughter the next time she gets stopped by one of Doreen's saloon toughs while she's going down the street."

He nodded and walked out, wondering if he hadn't taken a thankless task upon himself in waging this campaign to clean up the town. After all, he was only a cowtown photographer, and he had only a small place in the community. It was Sheriff Seiffert's job to keep law and order in the town. But there was too much politician in Ben Seiffert, and too little solid rock. The man was strong enough as long as he had the active support of his public. But he was the kind who folded easily when it became neces-

sary to take over the reins and the lead.

McKelvy's photography studio was between Sam Melody's saddle shop and Sara LeMay's millinery store. It was a squat frame structure with heat-curved paint and flared front which attempted futilely to give the building an illusion of size which it did not possess. Inside McKelvy closed the door behind him and gave his brooding attention to the room.

It was a place that had given him pleasure ever since he had come into this town. The large plate camera was on its stand its lens pointing toward the bench near the large window which let in the north sky light. The backdrop was a broad canvas painted to show a massive sycamore tree reaching its leafy arms over a ranch cabin. A creek such as was seldom seen in this dry land curved in front of the cabin deep-pooled and cool to the eye. It was the kind of setting that desert folks liked to have as a background for the portraits they had McKelvy make for them.

He went across the camera room and into the hallway that led toward the darkroom and his living quarters at the rear of the building. He still had to develop and print the picture of that Hat Creek rancher's team of matched bays.

He was starting into the darkroom when the door at the far end of the hall swung open. Jess Liggett stepped in, dry-eyed and sardonic. There was something cat-like and dangerous in the way the man stood there beside the open door, his tawny eyes raking the shadowy hall, his long-fingered right hand resting lightly on the butt of his holstered gun. He gave McKelvy a brief, contemptuous glance and spoke over his shoulder.

"He's here waiting for you, Luke."

Luke Doreen came in then, shouldering past Jess Liggett. He was a big man, heavy-shouldered and long-armed. He started toward the photographer in a deliberate pacing.

"I warned you last week, McKelvy. I only tell a man once."

Alarm drilled into McKelvy's brain, and he made one frantic attempt to back away. Then he recognized the futility of that, and halted.

"I might have known you'd come," he said.

Luke Doreen spoke almost pleasantly. "That's right. You might have known."

Doreen's big fist slugged out and caught McKelvy on the side of the jaw. The impact slammed his head against the wall, and his knees threatened to buckle. He braced himself as Doreen's second blow clubbed the side of his neck. He struck out feebly, and heard Doreen's contemptuous laugh.

"A little man who is going to learn his manners."

Doreen's fist sledged into McKelvy's stomach, and then the big man stood there handing out all the punishment that was in his long arms and powerful shoulders. McKelvy never remembered it. All sense of time flattened out in his mind, and he was aware only of the pain jolting through his body and brain. He fell once, and Doreen dragged him back to his feet.

He went down again, and was only thinly aware of the gambler's boot smashing cruelly against his ribs.

"You've got until sundown," Doreen said thickly. "At sundown I'll be hunting for you. If you're still in town I'm going to kill you."

Bootfalls faded back and the door slammed. McKelvy lay face down on the floor, too used up by the gambler's cruelty to move or think. He heard other footsteps in the hallway, lighter and quick as a woman's would be in a moment of great panic.

A thought skimmed the bare edge of his mind. *That will be Sara. Can't let her see me here like this.*

But he didn't have it in him to move. He lay there, staring at the rough boards

of the floor. Then he was aware of hands turning him over. He raised his eyes, and it was Sara LeMay kneeling over him.

HER face was colorless in its alarm, and a glistening softness was in her dark eyes. She was a large woman, and yet there was a tenderness in her voice that always had a way of touching something deep inside him.

"I saw Luke Doreen and his pet killer going out the back door. I thought it would be something like this. I'll help you to the sofa in your room, Ed."

She had the strength to do it, he thought. She was large-boned and strongly fleshed. He felt her arms slide under him, and a stubborn feeling of bruised pride made him shake his head.

"I'll manage for myself."

She drew her arms away, watching him anxiously. Then a shadowy smile faintly pulled at the edges of her mouth.

"A man like you never knows when he's licked. You want me to make you some coffee?"

She didn't wait for a reply. She turned toward his living quarters, and this was her way of letting him handle himself without a small man's feeling of shame and weakness before a woman. He sat up, and sickness convulsed the battered muscles of his body. He drew his legs under him, and each movement felt as though he were tearing himself apart. He pushed against the floor, bracing himself with both hands against the wall, and slowly came to his feet. There was a satisfaction in that. He was a small man, and he had absorbed a hell of a beating from Luke Doreen. But he had proved to Sara that he could still make out for himself.

He shoved away from the wall, and stumbled through the doorway into his living quarters. Sara was at the iron stove, feeding the fire under the coffee.

Without turning, she said, "I take it from Doreen's visit that you tacked up another photograph about him and his work."

McKelvy lowered himself into the chair at the table. He put his head between his hands, and his voice was a thick whisper.

"Yes. This time it was Tommy Dall's picture."

The woman closed the door of the stove's firebox.

"You won't ever quit bucking Doreen, will you?"

He pushed his head up, looking at the woman's broad back. "Someone had to do it."

"Stir up this town against Luke Doreen and his kind?" She turned and looked at him. "You think it's up to you to do that, Ed?"

He gave her no reply.

She said softly, "You've been riding Luke Doreen for two months with your photographs, and you've used the courthouse bulletin board to reach the public. You've tacked up pictures of waylaid drunks, men who have been drugged and beaten, and men who, like Tommy Dall, were killed. It's done no good at all, Ed. The town's afraid of Doreen. The town hates him, but is too afraid of him and his toughs to do anything about it. So you're all alone in this fight, and you haven't got a chance."

He raised his eyes to hers and managed a smile. "Can I have that coffee now, Sara?"

She watched him steadily. "I've tried to warn you, Ed. Is that your answer?"

"A little cream in it, Sara. No sugar."

She said with more sharpness in her tone than he had ever before heard, "Doreen will kill you."

McKelvy rubbed the ache at the base of his neck. "That's what he promised." He accepted the coffee she handed to him, and thanked her. He drank slowly, and

the heat of the coffee helped to settle his stomach.

He said, "There's a favor you could do for me, Sara. Somewhere in my back room is a pair of Colts. Fancy guns inlaid with silver and with a gold steer's head set into each butt plate. They're likely packed away with all the other stuff back there. I'd be obliged if you'd find them and bring them here."

Alarm widened the woman's eyes. But she only said, "All right, Ed."

She left him there staring at the brace of weapons she had brought out of the store room and placed on the table. He drained the last of the coffee, and pushed up from his chair. Movement hurt him; it unsteadied his vision and brought back the sick thudding of his heart. He went to the sink, pumped water, and made an attempt to clean the marks of Luke Doreen's fists from his face. Afterwards, he went into the darkroom and shuffled through the stack of discarded photographs piled in one untidy corner.

It took him nearly an hour to find the one he wanted, a photograph he had made two years ago of the tools of a killer's trade—his guns, silver inlaid with gold steer heads set into the butt plates. He carried the photograph back into his living quarters, and with stiff fingers began strapping on the gun belts. Sunlight was coming in at a low slant through his side window.

The thought of dying was a strange one to him. It made him remember all the towns he had seen in his time, working each one with his camera, and then moving on to the next. It gave him the feeling that he had wasted his life, and with that he found himself thinking of Sara LeMay and what she could be to some man.

He murmured, "A man looks across so many hills that he never notices what he has passed up."

He tried to adjust the hang of the

heavy Colts, but he couldn't make them comfortable. He put on his long coat, and then with a final look around the place walked out of the studio.

The sun was drawing low to the horizon, and much of the day's heat was draining out of the town. A breeze was beginning to roll down from the higher level of the Three Squaw Mountains, stirring ripples in the street's dust and touching McKelvy with its thin chill.

The street was empty, and by that he knew the word had gone out that Luke Doreen had put a tag on him. He paused for a moment on the plank walk feeling the friendlessness of the empty street. His friends were along there, but now their doors were closed.

He thought, not bitterly, "They'll watch it all and they'll wish the best for me. But they won't help."

He couldn't find resentment in him for their passiveness. It was every man's right to whittle his own stick and cut it according to his own pattern. The town hated Luke Doreen and was sympathetic with what McKelvy had tried to do, but each man had his own family and his own fear, and so Ed McKelvy was alone.

He stepped off the walk, and angled into the street. The horizon was beginning to cut into the red disc of the sun now, and a sense of waiting was wrapping tighter around the town. He came to Courthouse Square, and saw Sheriff Seiffert watching guardedly from his office window in the lower corner of that building.

SEIFFERT'S call reached only as far as McKelvy. "Don't be a fool, Ed. Come in off that street. You haven't got a chance."

He started to move on, but Seiffert's tight-lashed voice came out at him again. "What else can you expect? You've been riding Doreen with photographs against him for two months. Now he's bucking

back, and maybe with a reason. He warned you. Stay on that street, and he'll kill you."

McKelvy smiled faintly. "What good is a man to a town if he won't fight for it?"

He walked on, now angling his direction toward the bulletin board. He saw Jess Liggett shove through the batwing doors of the Spanish Dollar. Liggett looked across at McKelvy, grinning sardonically, and then drifted aside until he had his position at the corner of the saloon.

Luke Doreen came out then, tall and heavy-shouldered, with the loose-coupled flowing movement of a powerful man who was always sure of himself. The gambler's voice raised through the town's waiting silence.

"I told you how this would be, McKelvy. You've got another minute left to start running."

McKelvy gave the man a brief, attentive glance, and then turned away to the bulletin board. He took the photograph of the silver-inlaid guns from under his arm, and tacked it to the face of the board. Now he could hear the deliberate approach of Doreen's footsteps on the street behind him. He drifted aside from the bulletin board, and then turned.

Malice was drawing in the lines of Doreen's face, tightening them and turning his eyes harsh. The gambler's hand sank to the jutting butt of his gun.

"You're wearing guns under that coat, McKelvy," His voice turned wicked. "Go after them."

McKelvy made no move. He said, "Something you ought to see first, Doreen. Have a look at that picture I put on that board."

Doreen's stare flicked to the bulletin board and to the photograph on it. His eyes widened slightly, and then jerked back to the photographer.

"A picture of the Hueco Kid's guns." His tone had flattened out.

"The Hueco Kid's guns." There was no comprehension in his tone, only the barest trace of uncertainty. "Where did you get them?" Doreen asked.

"From the Hueco Kid," McKelvy said.

Doreen looked long at the photographer, slowly digesting this. Then he said roughly, "The Kid was killed three years ago."

McKelvy smiled. "I know," he said softly. "He was dead when I got these guns from him."

"I never heard who it was that killed the Kid." Alarm tightened in Doreen, and a note of fear was trapped deep in his voice. "If you've got his gun, then it must have been you—" He broke that off, and suddenly yelled, "Get him, Liggett!" And then Doreen's hands plunged.

There was no skill in the way McKelvy drew his weapon, no skill that was capable of matching and defeating any killer like the Hueco Kid had been. Not even enough skill to match Doreen's panic-driven speed. He simply reached down, located the weapon, started to pull it.

Doreen slammed out his first shot, but fear sent his bullet wide. He jerked his gun, fired again, and his bullet snapped the loose skirt of the photographer's long coat. McKelvy got his gun up then. He lined the sights, deliberate and careful, and then he released the hammer. Recoil jarred against his bent elbow, snapping the silver-inlaid barrel up.

He watched the thin gout of dust his bullet had driven from the gambler's coat. He watched blood come, and watched Doreen's mouth sag open.

"It wasn't you," Doreen whispered. "You couldn't have killed the Hueco Kid."

The answer to that remained in McKelvy, unuttered. *No, not me, Doreen. I traded a job of pictures for these guns. It was what you thought when you saw me wearing them that tripped you up.*

Doreen half turned, and fell.

McKelvy swung his attention to Jess Liggett. The gunman was backing into the alley at the side of the Spanish Dollar, gun lifted for another shot. McKelvy started toward the man. He saw the black burst of Liggett's shot and felt the impact of the slug, high in his shoulder. Shock halted him. He fired at the gunman, missed, and fired again. He saw his slug kick dust yards to one side of Liggett. He shifted his balance, and started toward the gunman again, still shooting futilely at the man. He heard Liggett's harsh cry and the brutal roar of the man's Colt. He kept trying to walk forward to get close enough to train his bullet more accurately, but he could no longer see well. Weakness came rushing into him, and he fell.

He rolled over, and sat up in the dust of the street, swinging his head back and forth to clear his vision. He saw Abe Bloom and Sam Melody, Will McAult and those others who had been his friends rushing out into the street. He saw Sheriff Seiffert's rotund shape running toward him, and he saw Sara LeMay pushing through all those others to his side.

He said faintly, "Jess Liggett?"

She said with quiet scorn, "He had the guns and knew how to use them, but he didn't have the nerve to stand up against a man like you."

McKelvy looked up at her, understanding suddenly that no man had a right to pride unless he also possessed humility.

He said in a murmur, "Would you walk along with me, Sara?"

She watched him steadily. "Do you think you can manage, Ed?"

He wondered about that. Pain and bullet shock had taken everything out of him, but he shook his head. "Yes," he said, "I guess I can."

Her eyes grew soft with understanding as she watched him struggle to his feet and head toward the doctor's office. She walked along beside him, her hand lightly under his arm.

THE GUNFAST SLEEP-BUT ONCE



With an abrupt grunt Rambo's assailant forced the gun to waist-line height. . . .

By
KENNETH FOWLER



*"In this country, brother,
blood is thicker than water—
an' a heap more plentiful!"*

CHAPTER ONE

Murder by Appointment

JIM RAMBO was almost to the outlet of Dutch Oven Canyon when the shot blared, beating a harsh rataplan of echoes against the gorge's steep bluffs. In the darkness he felt the grulla shudder under the impact of the bullet; then, before full realization could gather in him, it pitched down and he felt himself rocked violently forward and out across its limply sprawled carcass.

For a full minute he lay utterly motion-

less, feeling the hard pumping of his heart against the splintery shale beneath him, waiting with a tense expectancy for the inevitable second shot. It didn't come, and he wriggled a little away from the dead horse, closing a hand to his gun butt. Then, far back from the precipitous bluff to his right, he heard brush crash remotely, followed by a sound of retreating hooves.

He crawled in close under the shelter of the overhang then, and scratched a match alight across his black corduroy jeans. Under the tiny pennant of flame he clicked open his silver hunting-case watch and read the time, frowning. Eleven-fifteen. But luckily he'd started an hour early, and even taking it shank's mare, he still might make it. If he still wanted it that way—if he could feel reasonably certain he wouldn't be walking into a trap.

That shot made him feel a little less than certain. A three-quarter moon rode high and bright against the night's dark cloud scud, and whoever had fired from up there was either a damned poor marksman, or had aimed deliberately at the horse, instead of at him. Why?

The question brought no ready answer, and Rambo reached into his pocket and took out the note from Race Morley. He struck another match, and a pale shine hardened in his puckered blue eyes as he reread the briefly scrawled message.

Rambo:

Why don't we bury the hatchet? If you'll meet me at the Jack-Deuce tonight, closing time, maybe we can still make a deal.

Race Morley

The match guttering out seared his fingers, and he flung it away from him with a startled grunt. Why had Morley specified closing time? And why was he changing his tune so suddenly, after what had happened on Wednesday?

Squatted on a soft butt of sandstone, Rambo stared vacantly away into the darkness, trying to down the persistent,

uneasy feeling that there must be a catch in this somewhere. Three days ago, when he had walked into Morley's place and bluntly demanded the note his brother Hal had signed, deeding a half-interest in Rafter over to Morley, the gambler, with equal bluntness, had told him where to head in.

"No deal, Rambo," Morley had told him curtly. "Your brother tried for a big casino, and lost. Besides, what skin is it off your hide? All you're buyin' yourself is a new partner at Rafter."

They had been standing in the doorway to Morley's office, and a number of bar-rail habitués, lined up along the mahogany just outside, had witnessed the rest of it.

"I'll buy back that paper from you at a fair price, and not a damned thing else," Jim Rambo had responded flatly. "And I'm soft in the head, or I wouldn't give you that much of a break. You know the kid doesn't come legally into his half of Rafter till he's twenty-one, two days from now."

"Two days, three days—what's the difference?" Race Morley's voice had held an edge of cool, deliberate mockery. "Roke Blackmon drew that instrument and it's signed, sealed and delivered, to take effect on the kid's birthday. You think you know as much law as Blackmon, try and shoot holes in it."

Jim Rambo's temper had flared then, breaking into full violence. "Maybe it won't be a paper I'll be shooting holes in, Morley. Maybe it'll be a cheap, cold-decking tinhorn who has to learn it the hard way—like this!" With a looping, sledging blow thrown up from the hip, he had slugged Morley in the mouth, knocking him violently backward into the office.

An hour later, it had been all over town about his fight with the owner of the Jack-Deuce. Killing mad, he had lunged after Morley into the office and in violent rage had slugged him into insensibility, almost killing him.

But where that got him with Hal, he morosely reflected now, was a horse of another color. Ever since their father had died, wisely providing by will that Hal should not come into his half of Rafter until his twenty-first birthday, his brother, resentful over what he considered Mike Rambo's favoritism toward his older son, had been pirooting around town building a loop for trouble. And during the last couple of months, which he had mainly spent at Race Morley's Jack-Deuce bucking the tiger, he had finally earned himself a full snootful of the commodity.

And Mike Rambo could thank himself for that, Jim Rambo considered bitterly. For in the end he had written a codicil to the will, indulgently leaving Hal a thousand-dollar legacy to match a similar bequest made to Jim. And with a thousand dollars kicking around in his pants, Hal had wasted no time slipping his hobbles.

Hoping to set an example to Hal, Jim had immediately put his thousand back in the spread, but when he had hinted that Hal might do likewise, the kid had jumped him, fast.

"Sure," Hal had jeered, "I hand over my thousand, and then you own the works. The hell with that kind of a deal! I'm havin' me a little whirl while I wait for my half of Rafter, and by George, you show me ary rule in the book says I can't do that!"

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later, walking at his full, long-gaited stride, Jim Rambo still had the heavy weight of that on his thoughts as he reached Long Mile Hill, and started down toward the distantly winking lights of Fandango.

Hoofing on, his thoughts deflected to Al Rumford, his brother-in-law, who, since the death of his sister Jenny eight years ago, had hung on at Rafter as a sort of straw boss. It had been Al, a reticent, soft-spoken, rather easy-going man, seven

years Jim's senior, who had ridden in from town earlier tonight, and had handed him the message from Race Morley.

"Gil Sealey, Morley's bartender, asked me to deliver it," Al had explained briefly. "Said it was personal."

But Al hadn't been much help, when he'd told him about it. "Personally, I'd keep my hand damn' close to my gun, dealing with that sleeve artist," Rumford had advised thoughtfully. "But I don't guess there'd be any harm finding out what's on his mind."

He'd agreed with that, and at ten o'clock had started out. And an hour and a half later his horse had been killed under him in the Dutch Oven Sink, which certainly made it look as if Al Rumford had been right. He'd want five sure beans in the wheel, when he talked to Morley. Five beans, and damned quick eyesight.

Fifteen minutes later, at the junction of Division and Main, he met Marshal Lon Overman turning in off the board walk in front of the Eagle House. Seeing him, Overman halted.

"Prowling late tonight, ain't you, Jim?" Overman said. "Must be a girl."

Rambo peered sharply at the lawman's blunt, florid face, but in the remnant of light from the hotel entrance, it was masked by its usual expression of stolid innocence.

He said with awkward jocosity, "If it's a girl, I'm not in on it. Haven't seen Hal around, have you, Lon?"

"Not in the last hour." Overman gave him a narrowed look. "The Jack-Deuce closed half an hour ago. This town dies early on a Monday night."

Rambo nodded and started on. "Good-night, Lon."

Overman called to him. He stopped and turned.

Overman said, "Just a friendly tip, Jim. Better stay away from Race Morley. I've heard talk around I don't like."

Rambo said, "I'll plow my own furrow

there, Lon, but thanks for the tip," and irritably conscious of Overman still standing there looking after him, he swung brusquely and started on again.

He strode along, angry at his own anger, disliking the marshal's deviousness, but aware that his advice had been well-intentioned. Glancing back, after a minute, he was relieved to see that Overman had turned and gone into the hotel.

Two blocks farther on he found the Jack-Deuce closed and shuttered for the night, and coincident with the discovery felt a sudden draining of the tension that had been building in him. Across the street, he saw old Luke Pound, town drunk and panhandler, dozing on the bench in front of Burke Masserene's Day of Judgment Saloon, where the shutters were now being drawn and the lights going out. His glance idled downstreet, noticing that the lights were still on in Cassie Tait's Blue Plate Lunchroom. He remembered, then, that on Monday nights Cassie always stayed open late to catch the late-arriving freighters from the Rock-baby Mine on their weekly trip to the stamp mills, here in Fandango. The impulse hit him to get a cup of coffee before heading back for the hotel, and he was starting on past the Jack-Deuce when a sound like a muffled gunshot broke against the stillness.

Startled, Rambo spun around, facing the trash-strewn alley that channeled darkly between the Jack-Deuce and Arch McKelvey's feed store, on the left. The momentary silence now left him uncertain; the shot, if it had been a shot, had come from the rear of the saloon, the way he had placed the sound. An icy feeling of premonition stabbed through him as he stepped into the alley. At the same moment he was aware of lamplight shafting palely from a window of Race Morley's office at the rear of the saloon.

He advanced cautiously into the alley, picking his way through a litter of broken

crates and baskets of empty cans and bottles. When he was almost to the door of the office the light abruptly went out, and he halted, tensed. A half minute passed; then the door into the alley creaked open, and a shadowy figure stepped out into the passageway.

Rambo called softly, "Anything wrong in there, Jack?"; and was instantly aware of his mistake. The shadow blurred, came at him with violent abruptness. In the darkness he caught a metallic gleam, and automatically his arm jabbed out, stabbing for the gun clamped in the man's fist.

HE MISSED, but his fingers were laced around the man's wrist now and in a total savage concentration they wrestled for possession of the weapon. With an abrupt grunt, Rambo's assailant forced the nickeled barrel to waistline height; simultaneously Rambo threw the whole weight of his sinewy six-foot frame against the man, and feeling him stagger back, skidded his hand up to the gun and wrenched at it violently.

The gun kicked, throwing down a sharp gout of flame, and at the same instant Rambo's attacker heaved back desperately and tore free of him, breaking into a sprinting run for the mouth of the alley. Rambo cursed softly and let him go. Looking for him tonight in Fandango's catacomb of alleys and shadowy back lanes would be like hunting a needle in a haystack.

Slowly, Rambo awoke to the fact that he was still holding the gun he had seized from the man. With an absent gesture, he shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans. Whoever his assailant had been, the gun might be a useful clue in establishing his identity. In addition, there was one more possibly useful fact in his possession. The man had worn a rough-textured jacket of some kind, probably duck, and duck jackets weren't too common in these parts. Furthermore, Rambo had a hunch this

one might show a powder burn, if he should ever come across it.

Fully alert now, he moved on to the half-opened door to Morley's office and halted there, his ears straining for any sound from within. He could hear nothing, but he waited a full minute and then stepped abruptly across the threshold and flattened himself against the wall. He let another minute go by, then took a sulphur match from his shirt pocket and reached arm's-length to the doorjamb to strike it alight.

The wavering flame threw a vague panel of light across the darkness, and dimly outlined he saw a large roll-topped desk, a bamboo-legged taboret with a cone-shaped lamp on it, and at the far end of the room, a rawhide-covered couch, spread neatly with a bright Navajo blanket. On the floor alongside the couch lay a limply sprawled body.

A cold foreboding struck through Rambo as he crossed to the taboret and lighted the still-warm lamp.

Then he turned slowly and bent down over the body.

At his first shocked glance, he thought Race Morley was dead. The thin, ascetic-looking face already had the stark, blue-cold appearance of death, but the eyes still showed a spark of life and leaning closer, Rambo gripped the gambler's blood-soaked shirt, pulling against it with gentle hands.

"Race!" Rambo spoke with a flat-toned urgency. "Race, can you hear me? Who did it? Who did it, Race?"

Race Morley's up-staring eyes flickered, lighted with a faint gleam of recognition momentarily. Then his lips twitched, spacing out faint, barely audible words.

"Hal—wanted—paper. Not the kid. Hal—threw d o w n—me—Sorry—Jim. Sor—"

Abruptly, the voice stopped. Hurriedly, Rambo felt for a pulse. There was none. Race Morley was dead.

Stunned, Rambo slowly straightened. Hal. His brother, Hal—a killer at twenty. A rough-edged knob tightened in Rambo's throat.

He turned dazedly from the body. Then he saw the opened safe alongside the roll-topped desk. A narrow center cash drawer was spewed out of its slot and hung precariously by an inch strip of steel, a few pennies of change glittering in its stark emptiness. Below, on the floor, ripped files and ransacked envelope covers were strewn about in a topsy-turvy jumble.

A sick fury welled in Jim Rambo suddenly. To make his crime complete, Hal had stripped Morley's till before leaving, taking not only the paper he'd been after, but all but a few pennies of Morley's cash-box money.

Rambo's racing thoughts fell abruptly on another name: Overman. Overman knew about his fight with Morley, had heard of his wild threat to shoot Morley full of holes. Overman would be on his trail the moment they found the body of Race Morley in the morning. Or sooner, possibly, if any chance passerby should notice this light in the rear window and decide to investigate.

Mechanically, Rambo stooped over the taboret to blow out the lamp. Then he remembered the captured gun in his pocket. If there was any possible clue in the gun he'd better look at it now, while he had the chance.

He took it out of his pocket and held it under the lamplight. Instantly, he felt his heart loop down and strike against the pit of his belly. The gun was a fancy, octagonal-barreled .44, with a silver-chased mother-of-pearl grip. And Jim Rambo would have recognized it among any collection of six-shooters in the country. Engraved ornately on the silver butt of the stock were the initials, H.R.

It was the gun he himself had given Hal, more than two years ago, on his brother's eighteenth birthday!

CHAPTER TWO

Wanted—Dead or Alive!

WHEN he hit the street and saw the lights still on at The Blue Plate, he thought of Cassie Tait. He didn't relish the thought of what he must do now, but he could see no alternative. He wasn't quite sure whether things were fully settled between Hal and Cassie, but he had a feeling that they were. And if that were so, it left him no choice.

His blue eyes hardened remotely as he started toward the lunchroom. Apparently Cassie Tait had considered it no choice between Hal and himself. He was a man whose emotions bore inwardly, with little outward expressiveness, and he was never fully comfortable in the company of women, sensing a half-amused tolerance, on their part, to his lack of the common male aggressiveness. Not that Cassie Tait had ever been patronizing with him; but he felt a certain constraint in her manner toward him that had never been apparent in her relations with Hal. For a month, he had agonized futilely over the bold stroke of inviting her to a stomp; then Hal had taken her, twice, and too stiff-necked proud to ask her after that, he had pulled deeper into his shell and left the field to his brother.

Two teamsters were just coming out of the lunchroom as he approached the door, and he drew quickly back into the shadows to let them go by. He waited until their footfalls had died out, down the street, then glanced guardedly in through the lunchroom's spotless front window. Cassie was alone, busy with preparations for closing. He stepped quickly across the threshold.

She was carrying a tray of dishes from the counter as he went in, but even when she had reached the half-shadows in the far corner of the room he could catch the faint bluish gleam of her tar-black hair,

struck by a pale shaft of lamplight. He went up to the counter, feeling that awkwardness again, then spun the top of a stool as a signal of his presence.

Cassie Tait swung around with a half-startled quickness. She was a graceful, delicately-boned girl whose slightly irregular features were softened agreeably by luminous gray eyes that added an intangible glow to an otherwise conventional prettiness.

"Jim!" For an instant, her glance held on him with a stiff surprise. Then she said, "I was just getting ready to close. Nothing—nothing's wrong, is there?"

Jim Rambo let his breath go out, slowly, carefully. "Cassie, was Hal in here tonight?"

She seemed to sense the tension in him, and he thought he saw a little color build into her high cheekbones. "Hal? Why—why yes." Her eyes were suddenly uneasy, searching over him. "Jim, what's wrong? Hal's not in any kind of trouble, is he?"

He told her then, softening the blow as well as he could, and when he had finished, she seemed too shocked for speech.

"I reckon that's about all of it," he ended up lamely. "I might have been suspicious of Morley's statement, but finding that gun of Hal's was the clincher."

"I—I can't believe it," Cassie Tait murmured slowly. Then her voice changed. "And I don't," she declared flatly. "Did you stop to think that somebody might have stolen that gun from Hal?"

Rambo answered bluntly, "Who had any motive for killing Race Morley, outside of Hal and me? I can't prove I didn't do it. But I can come pretty close to proving that Hal did."

"What are you going to do, Jim? The whole town knows about your run-in with Morley. You'll be blamed, no matter who did it."

Rambo's voice was harsh. "Blood's thicker than water. I'll get Hal over the border. And I'll have to go with him. Rumford can handle things at the ranch." He avoided the girl's eyes. "Maybe we'll be back—some day."

Cassie Tait shook her head. "Running away is no solution, Jim. Once you start running, there will be no end to it. People will take that as an admission of guilt."

Rambo's tone flared into anger. "I'll stick by Hal, no matter what happens. But I'll be damned if I'll stick my neck into a noose for him!"

Cassie Tait paled. "You could go to Lon Overman, Jim, and tell him the truth. Lon's honest. He'd try and get at the bottom of it."

Rambo sighed. "It sounds good—the way you say it. But it wouldn't work. Lon would just think I was covering up for Hal." He picked up his hat from the stool beside him. "Well, I'll be moseyin' along. There's a lot of riding ahead of me to-night."

He was almost to the door when the girl's voice stopped him. "Jim—wait! There's something else. It might be important."

Tensely, Rambo spun around. "Something else? What?"

"It—it's about Hal." For a moment, Cassie Tait seemed reluctant to go on. Then, with a breathless rush of words, she told him. "Jim, Hal was in here to-night, at about nine o'clock. He was a little drunk, and got disagreeable, and I told him to get out and never come in here again when he was like that. A couple of hours later I saw him coming out of the Dixie Belle, across the street. He'd had some more drinks and was very unsteady. Jim, I don't believe he was sober enough to have killed a fly. It couldn't have been Hal who shot Race Morley!"

Jim Rambo laughed flatly. "Hal could have been running up an alibi. Anyway, I'm afraid that kind of evidence couldn't

possibly stack up very high with a jury."

"You act as if you wanted to believe Hal guilty!"

Jim Rambo looked back at her with a stony stare. "I'm sorry, Cassie. I guess I know how you feel about him."

"Oh, of course, you know how I feel!"

Cassie Tait interrupted him with a sudden withering vehemence. "You know all about women, don't you, Jim? And I could talk with you till Doomsday and you'd still be too jug-headed blind to figure a thing out straight, wouldn't you?"

He stood rock-rigid a moment, staring at her awkwardly, uncomprehendingly. Then, he said, "Good night, Cassie," opened the door, and slowly went out.

TWO HOURS later, he cut down from the trail at Punished Woman's Fork and swung his leg-heavy grulla into the moonlit, graveyard-still ranchyard of Rafter R. In the thickets up back of the corral, cicadas droned their weakening autumnal chant, and the low adobe ranch house, and the gray pile of the huge haybarn beyond it, had a frost-coated look in the moon's pale wash, gleaming with a cold refulgence.

Riding on to the corral, Rambo dismounted and put the grulla inside. Then he noticed Hal's big claybank, standing hipshot and still saddled just within the gate. The claybank was streaked with sweat and there was fresh red creek clay clinging to its hocks.

A sudden anger kicked through Rambo as he swung, abruptly, and started up toward the ranch house. Hal, drunk, had probably fallen asleep on the trip back, and the claybank had drifted off the trail into the creek bottoms.

Passing the darkened bunkhouse he had a momentary impulse to go in and talk with Al Rumford before rousing Hal; but that would awaken Ben Schack, the new hand he'd taken on six months ago when Hal had begun kicking over the

traces, and he wasn't sure how far he could trust Schack. Spurred now by the urgent need to get Hal awake and fog it out of here, he hurried on, heading for the side door leading into the kitchen.

Inside the kitchen, he lighted the reflector lamp above the cistern pump, then a lantern, which he carried on through the living room to the door of Hal's bedroom. He kicked open the door with his boot and stepped inside, holding the lantern high.

Hal lay on his bed fully clothed, his boyish face etched tangibly with the harsh lines of exhaustion and dissipation. Breath heaved through his open mouth with a sterterous, throbbing sound, and Jim Rambo noted that he had plumped down on the bed without even removing his boots or gun belt. With grim foreboding, his fingers groped under the sleeper's side. The holster was empty.

All his control broke then, and with abrupt violence he shot out a hand and grabbed a fistful of Hal's shirt, yanking him straight up against the bed's high headboard.

Hal moaned faintly, and for a bare second his eyes opened blankly in a glassy stare. Then, before Jim Rambo could catch him, his head abruptly lolled sideways and he slumped, crumpling back on the bed in a total drunken stupor.

A sick feeling swept Jim Rambo; then suddenly he remembered Cassie Tait's words. *Jim, I don't believe he was sober enough to have killed a fly.* A spark of hope ignited in him, momentarily. Maybe Cassie was right! On the other hand, Hal could have finished a bottle on his way back to the ranch. Or even after he had finally made it here, to his room.

Absently, Jim Rambo moved to the lamp table at the head of the bed and placed the lantern on it. As he did, his glance caught on the ladder-backed chair beside the table and he abruptly went rigid. Draped over the back of the chair was a gray duck jacket. And running

straight down the lower flap-covered right pocket of the jacket was a six-inch dark streak—unmistakably a powder burn.

Rambo felt his breath jam as he picked up the jacket and swiftly patted over the pockets. The two low outside front pockets were empty, but the one inside showed a pronounced bulge. He thrust his hand into this and pulled out a thick wad of banknotes.

It made no difference that he had steeled himself for such a discovery. Icy shock piled up in him as he rifled rapidly through the bills. There were two one-hundred dollar notes, ten twenties, and about twenty tens. Allowing for a few fives and ones he hadn't bothered to count, the roll amounted to more than six hundred dollars.

But where was the paper Hal had signed, deeding his half-interest in Rafter to Race Morley? Rambo placed the wad of bills back in the pocket of the jacket and swung around to the bed. A quick search of Hal's pockets brought to light only a key chain, a jackknife, and a few miscellaneous trinkets and pennies of change. Either Hal had already burned the paper, or in his frantic rifling of Morley's safe he had missed it entirely. But why, assuming he had found the paper and had been careful enough to burn it, had he carelessly left this incriminating jacket in full view beside the bed, where anyone coming into the room could immediately spot it?

Puzzled, Rambo was turning back to the jacket when a door banged loudly, and he swung around. Then came a flat tapping of boot heels across the kitchen floor. Grabbing the duck jacket, Rambo quickly tossed it into a wicker hamper of old clothes, and threw a blanket over the top.

The footsteps came steadily on, and with quick stealth Rambo moved to the door, his hand pressed to his gun butt. At the same instant a gusting sigh of relief

went out of him as he saw the tall, raw-boned figure of Al Rumford shambling toward him out of the darkened hallway.

Rumford came up into the doorway, stared at the inert figure of Hal stretched out on the bed; then, in his leisurely lazy way, he shifted his glance to Jim Rambo.

"Saw the light on," Rumford explained, "and thought I'd better make sure it was you." He nodded towards the bed. "Kid took a snootful. Ben and I had to carry him in from the corral. Keeled over the minute he lit from the saddle."

"Who took off his coat?" asked Rambo.

"His coat?" Al Rumford looked blank. "Why, I don't know. Ben, maybe. Or maybe he did himself, after we'd gone out. Why?"

"Al," Rambo said, "when I got to the Jack-Deuce tonight, I found Race Morley dying from a bullet in the chest. It was Hal who shot him. Not a shadow of doubt about it."

Al Rumford's eyes sprang wide with shock. "Hal shot Race Morley? You must be crazy, Jim!"

Jim Rambo repeated flatly, "It was Hal, all right;" then he made a quick recapitulation of the facts for Rumford's benefit, ending it with his discovery of the powder-burned jacket here in Hal's room.

Rumford shook his head in a disbelieving way, his bony features rumped in a scowl, when he had finished.

"Does make kind of a tight fit, don't it?" he muttered heavily. He thought a minute. "But as far as the money goes, Hal might have hit it lucky at one of the gambling joints—Morley's, or maybe Burke Masserene's."

Rambo grunted. "No dice on that, Al. The kid owed everybody in town. He couldn't have got credit."

Rumford said, "I'll do anything I can, Jim. You know that."

Rambo felt a muscle knotting inside his throat. "I know, Al. And I appreciate it, the way you've stood by. Dad gave you

kind of a rough deal on the will. I aim to make that up to you, one of these days."

"Oh, hell," Rumford growled. He drew makings from his pocket and started building a cigarette.

Absently watching the cigarette, Rambo said, "I've got to get Hal out of here tonight, Al. And get out myself. You'll have to hold the fort. You're the only one of us with a clean shirt in this."

"I'll keep the spread running, don't worry about that," Rumford said gruffly. He struck a match and held it to his cigarette, adding, "If you'd want to hole up at the old diggings on Pothook Mountain for a spell, I could sell the herd and get some money to you. If this runs into time you'll need a stake."

"Guess we would, at that." Rambo was thoughtful. "And there's a good view from up there. Give us plenty of time for a run if a posse got nosing too close."

"What about the kid?" asked Rumford.

"Carry him out to the porch. I'll saddle a couple fresh broncs."

Rumford nodded. "I'll get Schack to help with the kid. I took a fall today, trying to bust the bedsprings out of that new moro bronc."

"Hal should be doing that kind of a job." Rambo's voice was bitter. "Rough you up, Al?"

Rumford grunted. "Ankle sprain. Don't amount to much, but I can't trust much weight on it."

"Wake up Schack then," Rambo agreed. "I'll meet you back in front of the house in ten minutes."

AT THE corral he made a careful selection of horses—a leggy roan for himself, and a heavy-barreled chin-spot for Hal—and about fifteen minutes later he led them down to the front of the house. Al Rumford was waiting for him, with two saddlebags packed with grub. Rambo dropped reins on the horses, and then he saw Hal. Rumford

had propped him against one of the porch newel posts, and he was apparently still in a complete stupor.

"Schack went back to bed," Rumford said.

Rambo stooped and picked up his brother, carrying him to the chin-spot. "Bring some rope, Al," he called back over his shoulder. "We'll have to tie him on."

Not until Hal was roped firmly into the saddle did Rambo suddenly remember the duck jacket. He said, "Watch things a minute, Al. I'll be right back," and went back into the house. He drew the duck jacket from the hamper, and on a sudden impulse, thrust his hand into the inside pocket. His fingers touched nothing but empty lining. The money was gone!

For a stunned moment, Rambo stood rigid. Then, the jacket pressed under his arm, he turned and started through the doorway.

Al Rumford was hunkered on the porch step, rolling a cigarette, his thin, sallow face lacquered yellowly by the light from the lantern set beside him. He glanced up as Rambo stepped out on the porch and caught the look of agitation on Rambo's face.

"Anything wrong, Jim?"

Rambo halted. "Al, you sure Schack went back to the bunkhouse?"

"As far as I know, he did." Rumford flicked his tongue across the flap of the cigarette. "Why? Anything the matter?"

Rambo said curtly, "Finish your cigarette. This won't take long," and stepping down from the porch he went over to the roan and tossed the jacket over the saddle pommel. Then he started walking with quick, angry strides up toward the bunkhouse.

Ben Schack, peeled down to his red woolen underwear, had his hand up to the ceiling lamp, preparing to draw it down, as Rambo stepped softly across the threshold into the room.

"Where is it, Ben?" Rambo asked flatly.

Schack, a short, chunky man, with biceps like a blacksmith's, swung around with a start, his dark, stabbing eyes flaring into a blankly startled look.

"Where's what?" Schack's voice had a quick edge of belligerence.

"You know what, and I've got no time to argue with you about it," Rambo bit out tightly. "I want the roll you took out of that duck jacket, Ben."

"You must be crazy!" Schack blurted. "I don't know about any—"

Rambo never let him finish. His right arm cocked, and before Schack could have any awareness of his intention, his knotted fist cracked against Schack's jaw. Schack rocked back, his short arms pinwheeling frantically, and before he could recover balance Rambo savagely clouted him again and he went over, his head striking against the knifelike edge of a foot locker, and rebounding crazily.

With an abrupt bound, Rambo was over him. He seized Schack's shoulders and shook him violently, "Now talk!" he panted. "Talk, or I'll—"

He stopped, a sick alarm pounding through him. He'd hit too hard and too fast. Schack's head lolled against his shoulder. He was unconscious.

Rambo suddenly had a sense of time closing in on him as he searched hastily through Schack's pockets. The money wasn't there. With mounting tension, he flung back the lid of the foot locker and rummaged swiftly through it. The locker held nothing but a few shirts and pairs of underwear.

A muffled shout from the front of the house brought Rambo to his feet. He stepped quickly to the door and looked out. Al Rumford stood a few paces out from the saddled horses, and as he appeared in the doorway, Rumford made urgent motions for him to come on out.

"Just saw some kind of a light blink

out, up on the mesa," Rumford said, as he came up. "Might have been a grub-liner's camp fire, but I wouldn't want to gamble on it."

Rambo nodded and went on to the horses. For a moment he stood staring at the dark shape of his brother, strapped to the saddle of the chin-spot. Hal's legs were lashed securely to either stirrup, the upper part of his body resting forward across the horse's neck and held firmly by an ingenious sling arrangement secured at the saddle pommel. Satisfied, he gathered up the chin-spot's bridle reins and mounted the roan.

Rumford strolled over, and Rambo nodded bleakly toward the bunk house.

"Keep an eye on Schack, Al," Rambo said tersely. "When I went in the house for that duck coat, I found Morley's wad missing from the pocket."

Rumford stiffened. "You sure it didn't drop out, when you shook it?"

Rambo was startled. He wasn't sure, now that he thought of it.

"Maybe it did," he muttered slowly. "Guess I'm a little jiggered tonight, Al. I beat hell out of Ben, but I didn't find the roll in there."

"I'll try and get up to the diggings tomorrow," Rumford said. "And don't worry about Schack. I can hold him in line."

"If you come, call out your brand good and loud," Rambo said. He swung up a hand in a parting salute and giggered the roan.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead-End Trail

IT WAS nearing noon when Jim Rambo climbed the ridge beyond the abandoned mine tunnel and reached the rimrock jutting from the mountain's granite escarpment. Flattening out on the rock, he crawled to the drop-off and

stared down. The serpentine, brush-grown trail winding toward the mountaintop was eerily quiet in the sun's brassy glare. Nothing stirred or betrayed any sign of existence, human or animal, for as far as the trail was visible.

Presently Rambo rose and started back down the flank of the ridge to the wreckage of the old tool shack, where he had left Hal. Part of the shack's roof had caved in, and what remained of the door hung crazily by a thread of hinge, dangling precariously. Rambo stepped cautiously across the rotted door sill and into the room. Hal still lay in his soogans under a rickety work bench, snoring with a high, droning rhythm that was like cloth ripping. The sound drilled at Rambo's nerves, and with sudden decision he wheeled and went out to the fire.

The coffee pot which stood on the fire's blackening embers gave off a hissing spout of steam, and Rambo pulled a tin cup out of his saddlebag and filled it full. Carrying the cup, he reentered the shack and placed it carefully on top of the bench. Then, stooping, he gripped Hal by the belt and roughly dragged him from under the bench. Hal mumbled under his breath and jerked his shoulders in a resisting movement.

Deliberately reaching down, Rambo yanked him into sitting position and cuffed him twice in the face. Hal stiffened and tried to pull back, but Rambo's left hand held him. Then Rambo slapped him twice again.

Color sprang into Hal Rambo's cheeks; at the same instant his eyes fluttered open, and he stared at Rambo with a look of shocked befuddlement.

"Jim—" His glance went to the bare walls of the shack, and then, with growing surprise, to the stack of rusted picks and shovels still propped in a cobwebbed corner of the room. He looked back into Rambo's dourly staring eyes. "I—I must've been on a high lonesome," he

muttered finally. "I can't remember a thing."

Grimly, Rambo handed him the tin cup. "Drink this. Then I'll refresh your memory."

Hal's fingers shook as he eagerly seized the cup and drained it at a gulp.

Rambo took it from him, and with an angry vehemence flung it backward across his shoulder.

"You went to Cassie Tait's last night," Rambo began flatly, "drunk. You got fresh with her, and she had to kick you out. Then you got feeling sorry for yourself. You thought of that paper you'd signed, deeding your half of Rafter to Race Morley. You thought of what a damned fool you'd been, to let Morley get away with a thing like that. So you went over to the Jack-Deuce to brace Morley, and try and get it back."

He paused, staring down at his brother with a blunt look of contempt.

"Go ahead," said Hal Rambo meagerly.

"I'm not sure whether you found the paper," Rambo went on, "but while you were looking around in Morley's office, Morley came in and caught you at it, and you shot him. Then you got his keys and opened that safe of his and you tapped his till for six hundred dollars. Out in the alley, running away, you bumped into me and tried to gun-whip me. You got away with everything but this."

Reaching into his back pocket, Rambo pulled out the pearl-handled .44 and with a snap of the wrist sent it spinning into his brother's lap. "Don't try and tell me that's not yours," he finished flatly. "I ought to know, being the damned fool that gave it to you."

A stunned look froze on Hal Rambo's face as he stared down at the gun.

"You—you found this gun? You think I—"

"I don't think," cut in Rambo grimly, "I know. The gun went off while we were wrestling for it in the alley and made a

powder burn on the duck jacket you had on. I found the jacket in your room. And in the inside pocket I found a big roll of bills—the six hundred dollars you cleaned out of Race Morley's safe."

"You lie!" Abruptly, Hal Rambo lurched to his feet. "I never owned a duck jacket in my life! It wasn't me you bumped into, coming out of that alley."

"The hell it wasn't!"

"I'm telling the truth!" blurted Hal Rambo fiercely. "I didn't wear any jacket into town last night, I had on this blue wampus shirt. And whoever had that gun, they must have lifted it from me."

A dim hope sprang alive in Rambo. "You mean to say you never went to the Jack-Deuce last night at any time?"

"No, I don't say that. I did go there. And I talked with Race Morley." Hal Rambo stared into his brother's grimly narrowing eyes and his voice doggedly flattened. "But believe this or not—I didn't kill him."

"You didn't kill him? Then haul in your neck and get down to hardpan," said Rambo gruffly.

"The hardpan won't show much except what you already know," Hal answered. "I did go to Cassie Tait's about nine o'clock. I'd had a few hookers over at Burke Masserene's, and was feeling pretty good. I don't remember how it happened, but I suppose I tried to kiss her. Up until then, I'd only had a kind of hunch that it was you that had the inside track there, not me. Well, when she'd finished cuttin' me down to size, I knew it plumb for sure." He paused, his mouth puckering in a crooked grin as Rambo abruptly stiffened.

"Go on," Rambo got out thickly. "Never mind that!"

HAL went on, "Well, I got to feelin' right sorry for myself, and did about what you'd expect—went over to the Dixie Belle, and had me a few

more slugs of the stuff. Then, about eleven, I took a notion to see Morley. Maybe it was just the bravemaker workin', but anyway, I went over there and found him in the back office. I told him I'd been a damn' fool and wanted that paper back. I said I'd borrow on my Rafter half-interest and pay cash for what I owed him, but that I had to have back that paper by tomorrow at the latest."

"And Morley, of course, just told you to be a good boy and go home and sleep it off."

"Morley made a lot of phoney promises that I was just drunk enough to believe and then kind of gentled me out through the door. After that I went over to Burke Masserene's and got really roostered."

Jim Rambo grunted, staring thoughtfully away. Presently he said, "Maybe you'd have some ideas about this, Hal," and then, on an impulse generated by his brother's obviously repentant mood, he showed him the note he'd had from Morley and told him about the mysterious ambush shot that had delayed his reaching town at the hour Morley had specified.

A thoughtful vacancy clouded Hal Rambo's eyes as he finished reading the note and handed it back. His first words hit Rambo like a bare-knuckle blow.

"Looks like we've been elected suckers for a double frame-up," Hal Rambo said.

Rambo started. "A double frame-up! You mean that note's a phoney?"

"Race Morley never wrote it, that's certain," Hal answered positively. "I've seen his signature too many times to be mistaken about that."

Rambo's thoughts raced. Hal could be right. He remembered, now, his own shocked feeling of disbelief when he had first read Morley's conciliatory message. A double frame-up! Hal could be right. Somebody could have stolen Hal's gun, using it to murder Morley, then planned it so that he, Rambo, would arrive on the scene shortly afterward, to discover the

seemingly incontrovertible evidence of his brother's guilt. But who? It had been Gil Sealey, Morley's bartender, who had handed the note to Al Rumford for delivery, but Sealey could have been working for anybody. Certainly Sealey himself would have no apparent motive for wanting the Rambos out of his path.

Rambo's eyes narrowed vacantly, swinging back to his brother. "I've got no special enemies around here that I know of," he muttered absently.

Hal Rambo's face was stony. "Maybe not you, but I have. Burke Masserene, for one. He's got my I.O.U. for four hundred. Been threatening to go to you, but I've stalled him off."

Jim Rambo barely heard him. Abruptly, his thoughts swung back to the theft of the six hundred dollars from the duck jacket. Ben Schack! He looked at Hal. "You ever have any trouble with Ben Schack, Hal?"

"Schack?" Hal looked startled. "Why yes, we did have a little run-in one night over a poker deal. But you don't think Ben—"

"Never mind that. What happened?"

"Why, nothing! We'd each had a snootful, and Ben was feelin' a little proddy. He made a play, and Burke Masserene busted it up. Didn't amount to a hill of shucks, you start addin' it up."

Grimly, then, Rambo told him about the theft of the six hundred dollars, and about Schack's suspiciously sudden retreat to the bunkhouse, after carrying Hal from his room out to the front porch. He finished in a tired voice.

"I've got to get some shut-eye, Hal. There's a chance now we won't be dusting out of here as quick as I thought we would. Keep an eye peeled for Al—he'll be riding out later, with some extra grub for us. If you spot anybody else on the trail, wake me up pronto."

It wasn't Hal who woke up Jim Rambo, it was a vague sense of dusk chill in the

air, and a curious faint rustling sound, from the direction of the shack's open doorway.

Rambo sat up with a start. A cold sun was fading behind the distant peaks of the Hachetas, and chilled blue shadows were creeping into the room. Then Rambo's sleep-blurred eyes saw something else—a fragment of paper pierced over a rusty nail-head in the doorway. A faint breeze was fluttering the paper. That was the rustling sound he had heard.

A feeling of foreboding hit Rambo as he rose and walked to the doorway. He took down the paper, and recognized Hal's back-handed scrawl.

Jim: I'm playing a hunch. Stay holed up.
May be some news when I get back.

Hal.

Thrusting the paper into his pocket, Rambo went outside. Tensely, he headed upslope, toward the rimrock. He'd make certain the coast was clear, then try and cut Hal's sign before it got too dark. Whatever hunch the kid had, he couldn't let him play it alone, now. Hal had offered no glib promises of reformation, but more from what he had left unsaid than what he had said, Rambo knew his brother would buckle down from here out, and do his atoning with deeds, rather than words.

That thought held its steady satisfaction for him, then dissolved, imperceptibly, into a mind's-eye picture of Cassie Tait. The kid's news about Cassie had left him with a feeling of disbelief, at first, then with a huffishly irritated sense of being an insufferable dim-wit. But now as he thought about it a warm glow filled him, and he climbed the slope to the rimrock with reaching, powerful strides that carried him upward effortlessly.

Reaching the overhang, he crawled cautiously out to the crumbly sandstone lip and peered down. At the same instant, he went rigid. A hundred yards below,

a big zebra dun was making the slow ascent of the serpentine trail, and Rambo needed only one swift look to know that its rider was neither Hal nor Al Rumford.

Darting abruptly back from sight, he sprang up and started at a crashing run down the grade toward his saddled roan.

Something around here was wrong as hell. The rider forking the zebra was Marshal Lon Overman!

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Men Don't Tell

AT CATAMOUNT BLUFF, Jim Rambo pulled down his tiring roan and hitched around in the saddle, sweeping his glance out across the darkening valley which lay behind him. Blue dusk shadows were beginning to soften the valley's gaunt buttes and rock-scarred ridges, but night was falling like an impalpable gray mist, and it was still not dark enough to mask the silhouette of a rider, had there been one down there anywhere in range of the naked eye. In all that vast expanse of lowering sky and muted landscape, the only sign of life was a lone buzzard, lazily flapping its ragged pinions above the desolate emptiness of Dutch Oven Canyon.

Rambo faced forward in the saddle and gighed the roan. At Cross Creek he had risked a five-minute delay to fog up his sign, and it was apparent now that Overman had blundered into the wrong turn there and was probably at this minute floundering around in the creek badlands, cursing the Rambos from hell to breakfast.

A grim smile twitched Rambo's mouth as he rode on, satisfied now to let the roan pick its own gait. Overman wasn't too well acquainted with these out-trails, and even with luck, it was unlikely the marshal would get back to Fandango much before midnight. Rambo took out his silver stem-winder and looked at it. Nine o'clock.

He'd be in Fandango in another sixty minutes, and that would give him two hours, at least.

Two hours. It wasn't much time, for a man standing in the shadow of a hang-noose. Two men. Rambo's jaw knotted, his eyes pinching thoughtfully. He still couldn't quite get Burke Masserene into this picture, despite what Hal had told him about his trouble with the Day of Judgment owner. Apparently Hal had tried to recoup at Masserene's place for his losses at Race Morley's Jack-Deuce, and had just gotten himself bogged down more deeply. But unless there was more to the Masserene angle than appeared on the surface, he couldn't see much hope of an answer to the puzzle from that quarter.

His thoughts darkened, swinging back inevitably to Ben Schack. An aloof, taciturn character, Schack had always had the look of a man harboring a grudge against the world. And Hal's run-in with the puncher might easily have focused his vindictiveness into hatred of both the Rambos.

Abruptly, Rambo's breath quickened. It could have been Schack who had tipped off Overman to the location of their hide-out. Shack, cat-footing around, might have overheard Al Rumford suggest the Pothook Mountain bivouac. That, too, could account for Rumford's failure to get to the camp with that promised extra supply of grub. Rumford might have been waylaid by Shack, perhaps shot out of the saddle.

Suddenly Rambo thought of the buzzard he had just seen, and a swift sinking sensation hit at the pit of his belly. But he couldn't take the risk of turning back to Rafter. Hal had to come before Al.

He was struck by a sense of irony in the thought. Hal, his blood brother, had been the one who had deserted his responsibility at Rafter. Al, a kinsman by

marriage only, had been the one who had loyally stood by the outfit when Hal's defection had left Rafter critically short-handed, and Rambo himself out on a limb. Yet Rambo knew he could do this no differently, even if he had wanted to.

It was ten past nine when he hit Fandango's garish main stem and pushed his slogging roan upstreet toward Burke Masserene's gaudy rathskeller, the Day of Judgment. Reaching the saloon's well patronized hitch rack, he slid wearily out of the saddle, tied, and went up over the board walk to the awninged entrance. Inside, a tinny piano was rattling out the last bars of *The Girl I Left Behind Me* above a cacophony of maudlin voices and the low hum of talk, laughter and clinking glasses. Punching open the red bat-wings, Rambo stepped into a big, smoke-fogged room.

A long cherrywood bar ran almost the entire length of the saloon, on the right; opposite, occupying a commodious alcove illuminated softly by a line of green-shaded drop lights, were the gambling layouts for faro, chuckaluck and roulette. Rambo elbowed through an opening at the lower end of the bar and caught the eye of the bartender.

"Masserene around?"

Busy with a paying customer, the bartender growled, "This ain't the information bureau, friend—try the back office," and Rambo backed away, irked by the man's rudeness, but feeling in no position, tonight, to make an issue of it.

HALFWAY down the narrow channel between the bar and the gambling alcove, he halted suddenly, his prowling glance alighting on a blue-shirted figure backed against a window at the far end of the room. For a bare instant, a shocked surprise held him rigid; Hal Rambo stood slouched against the window sill in the lazy stance of an onlooker, watching the tiny white ball of

a roulette wheel bouncing crazily about on the thirty-seven numbered spaces of the table.

Rambo wheeled and pushed his way into the crowded alcove. He came up beside Hal, who hadn't seen him, and grabbed him roughly by the shoulder.

"So this is where you play your hunches."

Hal Rambo straightened up with a jerk. "Jim!"

"Keep your voice down," Rambo whispered flatly. "Now listen to me, and don't talk till I ask you a question. Somebody tipped off Overman to our hide-out. I spotted him coming up the east slope trail and fogged it out the back way. He'll be pickin' cockleburs out of his pants for a couple of hours. Have you talked with Masserene yet?"

Hal nodded, and held his voice to a low undertone. "I talked to him, Jim, and I think I'm on the track of something. You remember old Luke Pound? You didn't happen to notice him around that night you went to Morley's, did you?"

Rambo stiffened. "Come to think of it, I did. Masserene was just closing up. Luke was over here, in his doorway. Drunk as a lord, would be my guess."

"Luke wasn't drunk." Hal Rambo kept his eyes steady on the roulette table. "He came over to Masserene's this morning, and hinted around to Burke he might know something about who killed Race Morley. Burke figured he was just trying to cadge some free drinks and threw him out. Now he's not so sure."

Eagerness crisped Rambo's voice. "This may be the break we've been looking for, Hal. I'll talk to Masserene. Maybe he'd know where we could find Pound."

"Wait a minute, Jim. Pound usually comes drifting in here about ten o'clock. That's what I'm waiting for now."

Rambo looked at his watch. "It's only nine-thirty. You stick here. I'll try the Jack-Deuce and Dixie Belle."

"Anything you say, Jim."

"You watch yourself, kid." Rambo wheeled and started for the door. He was barely out of the alcove when the shot blared, accompanied by a brittle crash of splintering glass. Rambo whirled around, his heart pumping with a sudden stiff pounding as his glance reached to Hal. Hal was bent over, clutching the window sill with rigid fingers. Rambo watched with a fascinated horror as his grip held, for a bare fraction of a second, then with a heavy-headed lurch he toppled, and there was the sound of a dull thump.

A confused murmur of voices lifted in the room, rising to a harsh crescendo as Rambo plunged back into the mob.

Hal lay stretched out under the smashed pane, his face blood-drained, as Rambo broke roughly through the last fringe of onlookers and bent over him. The bullet had ripped into Hal's back, close to the left shoulder. Rambo felt for a pulse and was heartened at detecting a faint beat. He straightened abruptly, facing around to the crowd with a booting anger in his voice.

"Hell, what good is it to stand there and rubberneck? Get a doctor here, somebody!"

A voice from the far side of the room said, "Doc Gentry's here at the bar. Okay, boys, open up there and let the doc through." In the next moment the crowd was splitting apart and a dumpy little bald-headed man was strutting toward Rambo.

Doctor Willard Gentry was peeling off his coat when he was still twenty feet away, and at five feet he threw the coat at Rambo, said, "Evenin', Jim," and bent down. Rambo waited, feeling his breath against the hollow drum of his chest as the little medico began probing.

A minute later Gentry got back stiffly on his stubby legs, grumbling, "Damn-blasted saloons where a man can't drink

his liquor in peace." Rambo grinned crookedly at him then, having his verdict. Doc Gentry made it a matter of professional etiquette never to blaspheme when a case was without hope.

"Not too bad, Doc?" Rambo said on a sigh of relief.

"Slug's buried under his collar bone," grunted Gentry. "Take me an hour, maybe. If we could—"

A voice behind Gentry said, "Take him to my office, doc. You can use my couch," and glancing around, Rambo saw the burly figure of Burke Masserene plowing toward him through the edge of the crowd.

Ten minutes later, with Doc Gentry inside working on Hal, Rambo stood at the door of Masserene's office, finishing his blunt talk with the big, tow-headed owner of the Day of Judgment.

"So," Rambo said, "you're let out of the picture, Burke. You were only a long shot, anyway."

Wryly, Masserene grinned at him. "Sure of that, now, are you?"

"Doc said you were at the bar, standing him a drink, when that shot came at Hal. And if you didn't shoot Hal, you didn't kill Morley."

"Thanks," said Masserene dryly. "That's a load off my mind." More soberly, he added, "Good hunting with Pound. If the old rumhound comes in here I'll hold him for you. A couple free bites of snake-head and he'll be ready to curl up here for the night."

Rambo said, "Give him a bottle. I'll pay for it," and started out into the bar room.

On his way upstreet, he tried both the Jack-Deuce and the Dixie Belle, but Luke Pound was at neither of these haunts, so he continued on toward Halstead's Livery, at the northern end of town. Luke Pound had no regular roost, but Masserene had told him that the old man sometimes slept off his jags in Pete Halstead's hay barn, back of the livery.

The livery office was closed when he got there, but Obie Wilkes, Halstead's swamper, was in the stable, currycombing a horse. Wilkes was readily cooperative when Rambo told him what he wanted.

"Sure, Mister Rambo," Wilkes said, "you take dis lantern, and have a look-see. And if that old bum in the hay, you roust him out. Mister Halstead ain't too hot on Luke takin' his shuteye heah no more."

A curious compulsion to hurry gripped Rambo as he tramped through the deserted wagon yard behind the livery. Ahead, the big hay barn loomed out of the dark, eerily silent. Rambo reached it and stepped warily across its wide, beamed sill.

Then, in the first thrust of light from the lantern, he saw Luke Pound. The old man lay curled up on a horse blanket a few yards in from the doorway, his pale, rheumy eyes staring up at the rafters above him with a glassy vacancy.

Rambo crossed to his side in a half dozen quick strides. The long haft of a stable shovel rested on Luke Pound's shrunken chest, its sharp blade matted with blood and hair. Silvery, old-man's hair, soft as a baby's.

Rambo's breath caught with a startled jerk as he bent down. He looked once, then turned quickly away, wanting to look no more.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back-Shoot Trail—Last Stop!

JIM RAMBO put down his empty coffee cup and looked up from the counter into Cassie Tait's sober gray eyes. "I needed that," he said, and with a self-conscious awkwardness rose from the stool and picked up his Stetson. "But not as much as I needed the information you just gave me about those stains."

Cassie Tait murmured, "Then—then

you think they were bloodstains, Jim?"

"Your scrubbing brush would have gotten 'em out, if they were anything else." He stared down at the floor. The stains were still visible on the soft pine planks.

"I'll be weavin' along, now. I can't be sure about this yet. But I'd ought to know for certain in a couple of hours—by morning, at the latest," he said.

"Jim, you'll be careful?"

"Be a damn' fool, not to. Hal gave me some information, too, last night. Another matter."

He saw color flame suddenly into her cheeks, and turned abruptly, going to the door.

Her voice followed him. "Jim—"

He swung around, his hand on the doorknob.

"I—I'll keep open till twelve, if you want to drop by, later."

Rambo made a picture of her to take out with him. He said, "Had a notion I'd do that," and closed the door behind him.

Outside, he was aware of how his thoughts rebuilt the memory of that night, in the alley and the desperate struggle for the gun. The finger of the murderer, locked on the trigger. The sudden explosion of the weapon when it was pointed down—at the murderer's foot!

Rambo halted in front of the Dixie Belle, and then went inside; but except for a pair of drunken teamsters at the bar, and the usual assortment of regulars at the faro layouts, there was no interest for him here. He went out, and moved on to the Jack-Deuce. But there the result was the same, and Rambo felt a sagging disappointment. He thought bleakly: *Tomorrow, maybe*, and proceeded to the Day of Judgment.

The crowd there had thinned. He didn't see Burke Masserene, but Doc Gentry stood at the bar with Rumford.

He walked over and tapped Gentry on the shoulder. "How is he, Doc?"

Doc Gentry jerked around. "Oh, hullo, Jim! Hal? Hell, he'll be out bustin' broncs, another three weeks. Got a regular old whang-leather gut, that boy."

Al Rumford turned. "Mighty sorry to hear about the kid, Jim. Learn anything from old Pound?"

"No," Rambo said. He signaled the bartender. "Straight rye."

"Make it all around," Rumford said, and put a bill on the bar. Rumford stood watching the bartender pour the drinks as Rambo's glance crossed to the door. The bat-wings had just flapped open, and Ben Schack had come into the room. Now his dark, stabbing eyes were concentrated narrowly on Rambo and Rumford.

Nursing his own drink, Rumford said, "Hal's conscious, now. Doc let me talk to him."

Rambo said, "You must be carrying quite a roll, Al. I noticed that was a twenty you just peeled off for the bar-keep."

"I save my money."

"How's your foot?" Rambo asked.

A tiny edging of white appeared around Rumford's lips. "Foot's all right. I told you it was just a sprain."

"You told me so," Rambo nodded. "Then I remembered. You never took on a tough bronc in your life, Al."

"What in the devil are you blathering about?" Rumford bristled suddenly.

RAMBO kept his voice even. "Murder," said Rambo flatly. "And two names that sound alike—Hal and Al. I remembered something else, Al. That night I talked with Morley. One of the things he said was, *Not the kid*. Morley was trying to tell me it wasn't Hal who'd shot him. His voice was pretty thick. When he said 'Al,' I mistook it for 'Hal.' You killed Race Morley, Al, to get that paper Hal had signed, deeding his half-interest in Rafter to Race. You

(Continued on page 128)

ON THE TRAIL



HAUL up, gents—light a spell. We got another *Fifteen* bunched, ready to join the main drive; it's time to make a tally of the heifers. The big ones this trip are Larry Sanders's fine herd master, *Gunshot Editor*, and Charles W. Tyler's trail-town saga, *The Kid From Hell's Corner*. Ken Fowler choused in a tough, fast one, in between ranch chores—he writes us he's been bringing up his flooring from where it was goin' down in the cellar. After that he's gonna raise the roof—an' then write us another story!

Good writin', ridin' an' hammerin', Ken!

This last roundup we met up with a gent whose rope-calloused ham-hook we were proud to shake. We hereby present him to you—folks, meet Mr. C. E. Brown.

Gentlemen:

I am a reader of *Fifteen Western Tales* and was happy to see Kactus Katie's "She Buckaroo."

I am sending an answer to it, "Old He Buckaroo." Hope you can use it—I am an old cowboy of 62.

Yours,
C. E. Brown
Granite, Okla.

We're mighty proud to use, it, Mr. Brown. Here we go:

OLD HE BUCKAROO

Come all you old cowgals—and hark to my song

*I'll stand corrected—in case I am wrong
But I'm an old cowhand—and I'm not a dude*

I'm a wild and a wooly—Old He Buckaroo.

I've rode lots of broncs—and roped lots of cows

And I've done my share—of courtin' the gals

*I've rode on the range—and in rodeos too
I'm a wild and a wooly—Old He Buckaroo.*

*I've slept out at night—in the wintry cold
I've rode for hours—in the sleet and snow
I've had my feet froze—and my fingers too
I'm a wild and a wooly—Old He Buckaroo.*

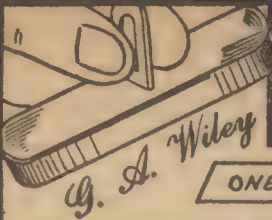
*Now don't be mistook—in readin' my brand
A cowgal can sometimes—make a fair hand
I admire their skill—and their courage too
I'm a wild and a wooly—Old He Buckaroo.*

*But I do think a gal—too pretty and dear
To cripple herself—a ridin' a steer
I think she'd be better—and do better too
If she'd leave the ridin'—to her He Buckaroo.*

*Now don't bust a cinch strap—or even a tug
Just waltz to the kitchen—and cook me some grub*

*For I'm most tuckered out—and hungry too
I'm a wild and a wooly—Old He Buckaroo.*

*Now don't get offended—you cowgals fair
I'm just an old man—with silvery hair
I've seen lots of summers—and winters too
But I'm a wild and a wooly—Old He Buckaroo.*



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

And now for the calf crop. We've been running into the same kind of trouble them nesters used to give the cattlemen—printers keep fencin' us in an' it's a dam-fool critter that keeps buckin' bobwire an' linotype. So thanks to all of you who've answered our requests for trail yarns. We won't print the complete letters this time, but just the most interesting excerpts.

Ad Elwood of Helena, Montana, writes:

The man most feared by Montana outlaws was John Biedler, leader of the Vigilantes. Biedler started his job by bringing in two murderers, Buck Stinson and Hayes Lyons. They were tried and sentenced to hanging by a jury composed of the entire population.

This was the Vigilante's first hanging and many were reluctant to set such a terrible precedent. Another vote was taken before the gallows and Stinson and Lyons were permitted to quit the territory.

After laying low for a few weeks they returned. Their first purpose was to kill Biedler. They trailed him to a saloon and entered with guns out. "You're the man who dug our graves, eh, Biedler?" shouted Lyons. "Yes, and you never paid me for the service," was Biedler's reply. In spite of themselves the outlaws had to laugh. They put their pistols back in their holsters. "My treat," said Lyons.

One of the citizens sneaked out and rounded up a few of the Vigilantes. Hayes and Lyons were laughing at another of Biedler's sallies when the door flew open and they found themselves staring into the muzzles of four shotguns. There was no second chance. This time they were hung.

Jim Hogan of Mountain View, Idaho, contributes:

Having heard the evidence against a horse thief caught red-handed, a Wyoming jury retired to render its verdict. The first ballot was eleven to one for con-

viction, the sole dissenter being the town's blacksmith. The other eleven set out to bring the blacksmith into line but as the hours passed his vote stayed for acquittal.

"I can see that we're gonna be here a long time," said the foreman, a grizzled old cowpuncher by the name of Dave Mathews. "How about a little poker to pass the time?" Four of the more persuasive members of the majority were delegated to work on the blacksmith while the rest joined Mathews in a poker game.

Mathews was more than fifty dollars in the hole when the blacksmith gave up and agreed to vote for conviction. Another ballot was taken but strangely enough there was still one vote for acquittal. "Some damn fool still hasn't made up his mind," said Mathews. "We might as well go back to the poker game."

The game continued till morning, Mathews counted his chips and found he was now a few dollars ahead. "Let's have

another ballot and see if we can't all agree," he said. The vote, of course, **was** unanimous for conviction.

"I can't understand who voted for acquittal on the second ballot," said the blacksmith as they filed into the court room. "I'm sure I wouldn't know," said Mathews, with a silent chuckle.

That will have to be all at this stop, folks. We've got the beginning of next month's *Fifteen* located in the deep brush, and top hand George Appell now has his rope on a big one. Look for it in the next issue; it's an Army yarn and one of the finest we've ever seen.

And keep the letters coming. It's plumb vital to us to hear from you, not only on the unusual bits of folk history that has made up the bulk of this trail gossip, but also on what you think of our yarns.

Hasta luego,
The Editors

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 124)

wanted it yourself. You wrote that note signed with Race's name to suck me down there and get me hanged for a murder you committed. You planned to knock Hal off later—and you almost did. Hal and I've got no next of kin but you. You'd have got Rafter then."

Al Rumford's hand darted up like the wedged head of a rattler, flinging his glass of whiskey into Rambo's eyes.

"Everybody hold it!" Rumford snapped.

Rambo blinked smarting eyes, watching him. Ten feet from the doorway, Rumford halted. "I'm getting at least one Rambo, before I pull out for the Rio."

Rumford's gun jerked, not from the explosion of blue flame gouting from its nose, but from the sudden jar of Ben Schack's wiry body thudding into him. A whole sheet of back-bar mirror behind Rambo fell with a splintering crash; at the same moment he saw Rumford savagely knee-butt Shack in the stomach, and as Schack went toppling backward Rumford's gun came lethally steady and he and Rambo fired together.

A cherrywood bar strip sprang magically fanwise at Rambo's elbow, but Rambo didn't look at it. Al Rumford's knees were crumpling like stiff wax as Rambo deliberately fired again, and then Rumford suddenly seemed to become top-heavy and tilted forward, hitting the floor with a muffled thump.

"I ought to kick your teeth in," Schack said. "Buy me a drink, though, and I'll call it even."

Rambo turned to Doc Gentry. "Doc, meet Ben Schack—the new foreman at Rafter."

"H-howdy!" Gentry gasped.

The bartender poured three drinks.

"Who's it to?" asked Doc.

"Make it to Cassie Tait," Rambo said.

"I'm goin' double-harness pretty soon, boys."

DEAD MAN'S STRIKE

By **SKIPPY ADELMAN**

WHEN Helena, Montana, was a tiny mining village its citizens received word that a band of Canadian Indians were swooping down to attack the settlement. A posse was hastily recruited and put under the leadership of the town's leading politician, who shall be nameless. Its first night the posse camped at Camas Creek.

In the middle of the night the posse was awakened by the Indians' war whoops. All the settlers prepared to do battle except the leader. He sprang on his horse, terror-stricken, and fled.

Years after, the politician was candidate for the U. S. Senate. His opponent was Colonel Wilbur Sanders. Resenting some of the remarks Sanders made, the politician challenged Sanders to a duel.

"Very well," said Colonel Sanders. "The one challenged has the right to choose grounds and weapons. I choose Camas Creek for the place. "And," he concluded, "Indian war whoops for weapons."

One of the miners who worked the Colorado gold fields met up with a slight accident. Another miner had shot five lead pellets through his carcass. The victim was a man of some distinction and a preacher was sent for from a nearby gold field to read the services over his grave.

The mourners knelt on both sides of the open grave and the preacher commenced intoning from the book.

One of the kneeling men absent-mindedly picked up a handful of dirt. His practiced eye instantly spotted the gold flakes which are the mark of rich pay dirt.

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(Continued from page 73)

started to speak. She took one glance at him, then turned and climbed up to the buckboard. The station crew shouted at them as the wagon passed, going down the road, but Bannerman did not answer.

"Maybe you should have left me back there with Hal," Carol said, finally.

"You knew what he planned to do?"

"Yes," she said. "You can see why I didn't have time to do any explaining in the wagon. I didn't know how soon they would come. Hal never let me in on the details of their plans, but I did know he meant to have this money. When he was so insistent that I go with him to the way station, I figured this was the spot."

"Their plan was fairly obvious, I think," murmured Bannerman. "Hal met Norton up by the building, told him the lay of the land. Then Hal was to come back, wait till some noise from Norton out in the timber attracted my attention, and hit me over the head from behind."

"I imagine it was something like that, Tracy. I was sure Hal didn't mean to have you shot, or I wouldn't have been willing to go through with it. I guess that doesn't excuse me. The fact remains that I was willing. Can you understand that?"

"I told you I never blamed you for wanting to escape your present circumstances, Carol," he said. "The kind of time you've had could twist anybody's sense of values."

"I guess what happened tonight straightened out that sense of values, Tracy. When they were going to lynch Saxon, and Hal was pleading with you to stay out of it, I saw myself very clearly, in him."

"It isn't too late," he told her. "This fee will be good, Carol, but it won't make me rich. I can't offer you any more than I did before."

Her eyes were shining. "It will be more than enough, Tracy."

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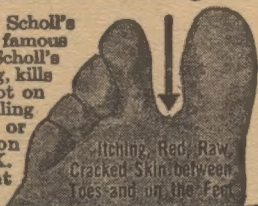
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